Alberto Moravia

1934

A Novel

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1934

Translated by William Weaver

Alberto Moravia is perhaps the most important Italian novelist of the twentieth century. Indeed, to imagine modern Italy is to conjure up Moravia's protean achievement —*The Conformist*, that most telling portrait of fascism; *Roman Tales*, which encapsulate the private lives of Italians; and, more recently, novels like the widely acclaimed *Time of Desecration*, which so remarkably portrayed the disaffected young of Italy today.

In his new novel, *1934*, Moravia returns to Italy in the time of Mussolini, a territory he understands better than anyone. Set on the island of Capri in 1934, the book is on the surface a strange love story. A young man tempted by suicide travels to Capri to try to regain control of his life. During his stay there he meets a young German woman, and it is their relationship, in all its mysterious, troubling contours, around which the story revolves. All of Moravia's novels have described love brilliantly. In *1934*, the author's two great subjects, politics and love, are masterfully intertwined. The book is both a portrait of strong emotions and a record of a terrible time. Erotic, passionate, profound, *1934* is one of Moravia's greatest achievements.

Jacket photograph by Tano Citeroni

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1934

By Alberto Moravia

FICTION

The Woman of Rome
The Conformist
Two Adolescents (Agostino and Disobedience)
The Fancy Dress Party
The Time of Indifference
Conjugal Love
Roman Tales
A Ghost at Noon
Bitter Honeymoon
Two Women
The Wayward Wife
The Empty Canvas
More Roman Tales
The Fetish
The Lie
Command and I Will Obey You
Paradise
The Two of Us
Lady Godiva
The Voice of the Sea
Time of Desecration
1934

GENERAL

Man as an End
The Red Book and the Great Wall
Which Tribe Do You Belong To?

PLAY

Beatrice Cenci

ALBERTO MORAVIA

1934

Translated from the Italian by
WILLIAM WEAVER

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1934

I

"Is it possible to live in despair and not wish for death?" To amuse myself, I imagined I was reading this question on a kind of scroll that an immense bat, its wings spread like the one in Dürer's engraving *Melencolia,* was holding in its talons, above the sea, as the boat rapidly approached the island of Capri. Perhaps it was the atmosphere of imminent storm that prompted the analogy with the work of the German artist. As in the engraving, a rainbow arched its wan colors against the background of the grim sky; and Capri's great red cliff stood out, looming over a calm, dark sea that, here and there, sparkled with blinding glints like a slab of lead scratched by the tip of a knife. Into this landscape, which seemed to be awaiting a catastrophe, the scroll with the question

about despair fitted well; and so did the bat, that twilight pseudo-bird with its doleful face, shrill cry. In any event, the question had been nagging me for some time; and as I was unable to find a satisfactory answer, I had it always before my eyes, even when I dreamed.

For a little while I observed this landscape "through the concept" of Dürer, then I lowered my eyes and saw, just opposite me, seated on the deck, a young woman who shook her head gently but firmly, as if she were saying to me: No, have no illusions; it's not possible, absolutely not. I thought I had made a mistake: I looked again more carefully, and I was forced to conclude that the woman really was shaking her head negatively, while looking hard at me, as if I had actually asked my question aloud and to her. The illusion was further confirmed by the expression of her eyes, which didn't seem nonchalant, but rather inspired by a definite wish to communicate. In those eyes, the feeling of despair was, in fact, clearly legible, in the gloomy and unhappy gaze of her big, green pupils; the connection with the negative gesture was inescapable. Yes, she was in despair and wanted to tell me she was. With that shaking of her head, she seemed to say to me: We have the same feeling. But my idea of it is different from yours.

All these thoughts came to me at the first moment, seeing the woman reply so precisely to a question I hadn't asked her. Then I told myself that the despairing look in her eyes could be caused by nearsightedness; and as for the shaking of her head, perhaps it was a mild, silent reproach for my becoming aware of her only now, after having ignored her for the whole crossing from Naples to Capri.

Then I studied her with more detached, objective curiosity. She seemed hardly more than an adolescent;

but with a certain womanly quality borne out by the wedding ring on the finger of her long left hand. She held her broad, bony shoulders stiffly; her breasts jutted out, almost horizontal, pointed; awkwardly she crossed her skinny thighs, as if the breadth of her pelvis embarrassed her. Her face didn't confirm this impression of maturity: at the top of her white, nervous neck, it seemed childish, and so did the huge eyes, the tiny nose, and the fleshy mouth. The thick, disheveled red hair that fell over her forehead gave that face a feline look.

She was looking at me with an insistence that was discomfiting since it clearly derived from a wilful obstinacy. Then she turned toward the man beside her and murmured something into his ear. He looked at me and nodded. At this point I felt entitled to examine the man. He could easily have passed for the girl's father; but his hand, the fingers lovingly entwined in hers, made it clear he was not. Dressed, or rather encased, in a kind of tropical uniform of khaki canvas, too tight and all rumpled, this heavy, stocky man had a small, bald head and puffy cheeks, which seemed somehow dented, with a tiny nose and mouth poking out from between them. The chin descended in a deep double fold; a scar slanted across the lower part of his right cheek; behind his glasses a pair of dim blue eyes peered out in an unmoving gaze.

After whispering into the man's ear, while glancing at me so as to leave no doubt that she was speaking of me, the girl resumed her former position and returned to staring at me with the same insistence, though no longer shaking her head. Now I regretted not having noticed her immediately after we left Naples; and so I decided to make up for lost time by establishing with her a rapport consisting now only of glances, which I could then develop, after reaching the island. But what rapport? I

realized she had already laid its groundwork, giving to her eyes, as she looked at me, an expression of despair, the same expression, in all likelihood, that had been in my eyes when, unaware of being observed, I had given my imaginings free rein. The question "Is it possible to live in despair and not wish for death?," legible on my face, had perhaps led her to hope she could create a complicity between the two of us. Now I had only to move on, still with looks, to something deeper and more specific.

Thus a kind of dialogue between our eyes began, and it lasted till the moment when the boat entered the port of Capri. I gazed at her and she gazed at me. To my surprise, I discovered something I had always known but never experienced: namely that we can not only communicate with our eyes, but actually speak with them in a distinct, detailed fashion. With something close to amazement, I realized I was telling her that I was unhappy, in anguish, despairing; that she mysteriously resembled me since, like me, she was unhappy, in anguish, despairing; that this resemblance was itself the beginning of something that could only be given the name of love; that, for this reason, I hoped ardently we would see each other again on Capri; that, for this purpose, I begged her somehow to let me know where she would be staying on the island, or, at least, to allow me to approach her and say a few words; and so on.

But all these things, which in vocal conversation I would have said gauging caution and sincerity according to their reception, my eyes were now expressing—I realized—in a passionate tone, without reticence, imprudently, violently. So I couldn't help thinking that the passion of our dialogue enshrouded us, closed us off in that exclusive, enraptured atmosphere surrounding

two singers as they perform a love duet; and we had become very similar, even in the ridiculousness of operatic unlikelihood, to two characters singing blissfully while the orchestra accompanies them, inspires them, and comments on them, and the awed spectators hold their breath. But at the same time, I felt with relief that this ironic compassion didn't work. We weren't two singers, but two people who, until a few moments before, had been unaware of each other's existence. And we were not on an opera stage, but in the reality of life, on the deck of the boat that goes from Naples to Capri.

I would have liked to break off the dialogue, turn my eyes elsewhere. But I couldn't, because I had the distinct sensation that my encounter with this woman with the despairing face was neither random nor ephemeral; on the contrary, I had probably been expecting it, seeking it all my life; now I had to prevent this long-dreamed-of opportunity from escaping me. Yes, through my whole life I had waited for that despairing gaze which, even in its despair, was animated by a lucid stubbornness. Seeing those eyes staring at me, I felt the strange, overwhelming sensation of having experienced this moment before, if not in reality, at least in my desires. As if the girl and I had already met in a dream, had made a tryst, and were feeling, now, as we met, the precise emotions we had known we would feel.

Meanwhile, as these reflections continued, I saw the moment approaching when the boat would enter the port of Capri. Now the storm that had seemed imminent a few minutes before had apparently vanished; the mass of black clouds had fled toward the horizon, where it had condensed into a single black shape, like a long, thin cigar; the mountain of Capri, its red cliffs covered with green, stood out in a blue and radiant sky. I decided I

hadn't a moment to lose in arranging our next, more direct meeting. In fact, there, the boat's whistle emitted two short yelps and a longer third one, to announce our arrival. And the girl and her husband, facing me, rose from their bench.

Then I charged my gaze with an imperious, interrogatory intensity; and at the same time I nodded toward Capri, as if to say: Tell me the hotel where you're staying on Capri. Looking at her in that way, I had the sensation I was behaving virtually like a madman; but who cared? I had to see her again at all costs. I realized she was aware of my look; but, strangely, instead of returning it, she whispered something to her husband. His reaction was prompt and unforeseen. He bent down toward me, as I was still seated, and asked me in German: "You understand German, don't you?"

I answered immediately, amazed and delighted: "Of course I do. I took my degree at the University of Munich with a thesis on Kleist."

"Very well. Then if you understand German, I must tell you that we are going to the Pensione Damecuta at Anacapri."

Upset by some vague suspicion of such an unusual husband, but tempted to accept this situation at once convenient and mysterious, I replied hastily: "As a matter of fact, I was wondering where I should go, because I haven't made any reservation. Pensione Damecuta, Anacapri. Fine. Allow me to introduce myself: Lucio—"

I couldn't finish. He interrupted me in a furious voice: "No, don't bother to introduce yourself: it's pointless. I gave you our address, not because I have any wish to see you again, but to make you stop your shameless exchange of glances with my wife. In fact, I ask you, from now on, to stay away from us. Is that clear?"

I received this invective with amazement mingled with profound malaise. I looked at the girl, almost hoping she would defend me. But her eyes evaded mine; in fact, she shrugged lightly, as if to say: Serves you right. Filled with a bewildered anger and shame, I watched them get in line behind the other passengers. Again they were a pair of perfect strangers; how could I have deceived myself into thinking that I had a love rapport with this broad-shouldered, bony adolescent girl with thick red hair, a relationship downright fundamental in my life, past and future? But then came another surprise: suddenly she half turned and gave me a look, clearly pleading and full of complicity. Perhaps she wanted to tell me not to take her husband's rage seriously, and perhaps to tell me not to abandon her. Then the gangway was thrown down onto the dock; the passengers began to go ashore. I saw the two Germans disappear into the crowd without anxiety and without regret, rather with a feeling of happiness: I had received that pleading glance; it satisfied me for the moment. More than anything, I felt the need to reflect calmly on what was happening to me.

I tried in vain to do this a little later, in the carriage taking me to Anacapri. The carriage proceeded at a walk, up the steep road; on one side I had the sea, which, now that the storm had receded, was again blue and luminous; on the other side, the great beetling cliff of Monte Solaro. Then—I don't know why—instead of reflecting, as I had meant to, on my encounter with the girl on the boat, I began to ponder, almost voluptuously, the meaning of this landscape: I was sure it had one, and, moreover, that the meaning concerned me. Finally, I thought I had worked it out; the panorama was divided into two distinct, opposing elements: one vertical and

menacing, represented by the mountain looming over my head; and one horizontal and reassuring, represented by the calm, happy expanse of the sea. Now, the most interesting feature was the fact that, as I saw it, these two elements were, so to speak, lying. It was totally unlikely that the mountain would fall down on me; whereas, on the contrary, it was quite possible that, in a storm, the sea would swallow me up. What did it all mean as far as my life at this moment was concerned? It meant, I thought, as I began to relish the game, that, while despair, represented by the threatening mountain, in all likelihood, would never overwhelm me, love, represented by the peaceful sea, could easily engulf me in the very near future.

I record this nonsense to give an idea of the happiness in which, all of a sudden, I found myself inexplicably immersed. In reality, I was happy because it's possible to be happy at twenty-seven, with many years of despair behind you and the hope of a great love (that it was going to be a great love I was absolutely sure) before you. So despair for the first time mingled with hope, like two rivers of different waters and different sources, the former making the latter more joyous, and the latter deepening the former. I was drunk with joy; at the same time, in despair as I had never been before. The problem that for a long time had tormented me, whether it was possible to make despair "stabile," so to speak—transform it, that is, into a normal condition of life and thus never arrive at the logical and equally inevitable conclusion of suicide—was suddenly turned upside down. Again, as in my worst days, I felt ready to kill myself; but this time, curiously, not because of lack of hope, but because of a hope that was too big, unwilling to have any dealings with a despair that was, as I explained, "stabilized."

Suddenly the course of these thoughts was interrupted by a sound of voices and the clatter of wheels: a carriage was behind us and, with the impatient trot of a horse faster than ours, was about to pass us. Then I saw that it wasn't the driver—a slim, curly-headed youth sitting on the box with an amused expression—who was urging the horse on in the exhausting, uphill race; it was a woman, beside him, who had taken off his cap to jam it on her thick and disheveled red hair. In this woman, also because I immediately recognized her husband, sprawled on the seat of the carriage, with his usual expression, part complicity and part anger, I recognized the German girl from the boat. She was stretching out her long, thin arms to shake the reins; with guttural cries she was inciting the horse; below the cap's visor her face was excited, laughing. Their carriage overtook ours and for a moment we were side by side. I then saw the girl seize, as it were, my gaze and, promptly, take off the cap and put it back on the driver's head. Then she turned and said something to her husband, indicating me with her eyes, without the slightest embarrassment. The husband made an irritated gesture, as if shrugging and saying: What have I got to do with it? And their carriage, driven at a frantic gallop by the excited driver, animated, it seemed, by a sudden spirit of rivalry, flew past us and disappeared at the curve, beyond a grove of ilexes.

When the Germans' carriage had disappeared, my driver, a corpulent man of about fifty, turned abruptly toward me and said, curt and sententious: "They handle a carriage like they were tram drivers. Don't they know a horse gets worn out, galloping uphill?"

And, as if to show me the proper way to treat a horse, he stopped the carriage, jumped down from the box, and, leading the horse by the bridle and cracking the whip in the air from time to time, he began walking along beside

the carriage. To make conversation, I said: "Perhaps your horse is old. The other one seemed much younger."

He protested, offended: "My horse old? Why, he's a colt still. I know my horse, and I know what he can do and what he can't do. That guy doesn't know his. And, of course, naturally, there was a woman. At his age, how can you refuse a woman anything?"

I replied, again just to be saying something: "There are some men who know how to refuse."

"In that case, they don't have any feelings." He hesitated, then added, revising for the occasion a well-known, crude proverbial expression: "Don't you know that a woman's hair pulls harder than a hundred pair of oxen?"

I didn't say anything. We made the whole climb in silence, he walking beside the carriage, holding the bridle, a cigar between his teeth; I pretending to admire the view. At the end of the ascent, he stopped the carriage again, jumped into the driver's seat with unsuspected agility, and announced bitterly: "There, now I'll show you whether my horse is old or not." He cracked the whip loud in the air. The horse immediately set off at a brisk trot.

But, whether because he was whipping him so much, or because the animal really was young and mettlesome, the horse now shifted from a trot to a gallop and from that gallop to a wild dash. At first the driver continued encouraging the animal with cracks of the whip and urgent shouts, then realized things were getting out of hand and tried to restrain him, tugging on the reins. With all four legs flung into a furious, awkward run, the now-crazed horse turned into the narrow road that leads to Anacapri, the carriage jolting this way and that, risking a smash at any moment against the trees that flanked the way. The driver, now, was shouting something I

couldn't understand, probably in dialect, and was pulling on the reins with all the strength in his arms. The carriage careened along a brief stretch of road, then I saw it was heading straight for a woman walking on the right side, her back to us. I had time to note she was wearing a white blouse and a little green skirt; neatly combed brown, curly hair fell over her shoulders, springing lightly at each step she took. I had time to think: A young woman, beautiful, perhaps. Then what I feared would happen did happen: the carriage almost struck the woman, who saved herself by jumping to one side. Finally the driver managed to stop the horse. The woman turned and assailed the man.

Her violence struck me, but perhaps her face struck me even more: it was neither young nor beautiful as, at first glance, her light, curling hair had made me imagine. It was, on the contrary, the face of a mature woman, with slightly Mongol features: tiny slanting black eyes, snub nose, a thin-lipped but protruding mouth. A face of a sad macaque, and dusted by a too-white powder. The blazing lipstick on her mouth painted nonexistent lips, like a fresh wound, still bleeding.

The woman flung herself on the driver, both arms raised, and as she tried to strike him with her handbag, she also cursed in Capresc dialect, with a distinct foreign accent. The driver tried to draw back and ward off the handbag blows with his arm as best he could; meanwhile, he seemed to observe her calmly, like a man finding himself in a familiar situation, knowing the right attitude to take. Then, seeing that the woman wasn't calming down, he spoke to her in a soothing, somewhat ironic tone, calling her by name, "Sonia," and using the *tu*. I didn't understand what he was saying; he, too, was speaking in dialect. But the woman didn't calm down at

all; in fact, she shifted from blows to insults, now in Italian: "son of a whore, bastard, pig, monster." Her voice grew hoarse in her invective and seemed to express not so much a passing fury as an old, sullen rage. Finally, when the driver said, good-natured but teasing: "If you keep on like this, you'll ruin your looks," she yelled. "You old shit," and quite unpredictably she stuck her tongue out at him. For some unknown reason, I was aroused by the sight of this thick tongue, scarlet and pointed, glistening with saliva, extending from her mouth for almost its full length. I thought, with amazement: "Outside she is old, an old monkey, but inside she's an adolescent: that's the tongue of an eighteen-year-old." It was only a moment; then she turned to me and shouted: "And who are you?" "My name's Lucio—" "Ah, Lucio, is it? I saw you grinning, you cheap little trick. Take this, too!"; and again she stuck out that tongue, so indecent in its youthfulness. Then, as suddenly as her anger had flared up, it died; she turned her back on us, patted the bag that was slung over her shoulder, and went off along the road without looking round. I saw her walk on a little, then disappear on a side path.

We resumed our way, this time almost at a walk. I asked the driver who the woman was, he answered she was a Russian, the secretary of Signor Shapiro. And who was Signor Shapiro? Signor Shapiro was an Englishman who had created a museum of paintings, here in Anacapri. Sonia, besides being Signor Shapiro's secretary, also ran the museum. And where did Sonia live? She lived in Shapiro's house, in the private part of the museum building, where Shapiro also lived when he was staying on Capri. What? Didn't Signor Shapiro live regularly in Anacapri? No, he came only in the winter. The rest of the year he was in London or on the Riviera. I didn't

know what else to ask; but the driver, twisted toward me on the box, was now in a confidential mood, and so, at my last question, "How is it that that Russian woman speaks Italian so well?" he snickered and answered that by now Sonia, in every respect, could be considered Caprese; everybody in the town knew her, many men knew her best of all, and he included himself among them.

He referred to his former relations with Sonia, calmly self-confident, without the slightest embarrassment. And after a brief silence he added: "Here in the town they call her the monkey. But she always finds somebody who's attracted to her."

I looked away, toward the road. The driver turned his back again, relighted the cigar that had gone out between his lips, cracked the whip. The horse broke into a trot.

We passed the church square, covered another good stretch of road, then stopped. The driver jumped down from the box, hoisted my suitcase onto his shoulder, and beckoned me to follow him. We came into a large, asymmetrical, unpaved space, with a long flight of broad steps going down, surrounded by hovels of different size, all white and almost without windows, Arab-style. In the midst of this sort of square, where you might have expected to see a fountain or a monument, there was a large olive tree, whose gnarled and twisted trunk underlined the strange, temporary aspect of the place. The driver, preceding me down the steps with my suitcase on his back, headed toward the only building not in Caprese style: a nineteenth-century house with a Pompeian red façade, with three very regular rows of windows, the kind seen often in Naples and its environs. This was the Pensione Damecuta, whose existence had

been revealed to me by the irate husband of the red-haired German girl. The entrance was not on the square, but in a little side alley; a gate was wide open, admitting us to a rank garden filled with sunshine, unpredictable and surprising among all those houses. We crossed a short path between two rows of blooming oleanders, and came out in a yard in front of the main façade. The pensione building turned its back to the village and overlooked the countryside; the slopes of Mount Solaro could be seen, dotted with olive trees, and below, at the horizon, beyond the fields, the glint of the sun on the calm sea.

An old marquee of iron and glass protected the front door of the pensione; an elderly dog, with a woolly white coat, got up lazily from the threshold. We went inside. I approached the concierge's desk. An old man in a gray suit, a long beard spreading over his vest, looked up at me, over his glasses. I greeted him and told him I wanted a room.

He stared at me with puzzlement, then asked if I had made a reservation. I told him I hadn't. He sighed, took a long look at a ledger thick with names, stroked his beard, sighed again, and finally said, in a firm tone: "I'm sorry; we have no rooms."

I myself was amazed by the violence of my desperation on learning that I couldn't live in the same pensione with the German couple. It was a momentary despair which, however, served cruelly to confirm my permanent despair, as it might be called. And so, because of a trivial matter of accommodations, I would be unable to see the red-haired adolescent again; and so, because of the simple fact that they had made a reservation and I hadn't, the great love of my life was going up in smoke! My eyes filled with tears; I blurted: "But this is a disaster

for me; it's the end." I didn't know what I was saying; but I felt that these excessive and confused words expressed exactly the excess and the confusion of my spirit at that moment. I saw the old man look at me over his glasses with surprise, and I added nervously: "The fact is, I'm a writer; I'm writing a novel; I had been counting heavily on this pensione; it seemed to me the ideal place to spend a month and work on my book."

I thought I had been very clever: in the same sentence I had replaced love with literature, I had introduced myself, I had intimated my intention of staying a month in the pensione. I don't know which of these three facts impressed the proprietor: certainly he changed his attitude visibly. He stroked his beard again and said: "If you're staying a month, I can give you, for the time being, a room with twin beds, and then move you to a single as soon as one is free."

By now I was swept away on a course of uncontrolled emotion and couldn't restrain myself: "I don't know how to thank you, Signor—?"

"Galamini."

"I don't know how to thank you, Signor Galamini. You have no idea, or rather, you certainly do have an idea of how important the place where a writer works is for him. It's essential, decisive. A window placed in a certain way, with a certain light, a certain silence: and the novel is off to a good start or a bad one!"

Signor Galamini observed my agitated loquacity with inscrutable patience. Finally he said: "We've had more than one writer, here in the pensione. In his day, my father's day, that is, Ibsen stayed here. We even have a picture of him. There."

And he pointed out to me a large oval photograph, hanging over the architrave of the archway leading from

the hall to the stairs. Caught off guard, once again I couldn't restrain my loquacity, inspired by joy at having achieved my wish: "Ibsen! Why, I know his work very well. What did Ibsen do in Anacapri? I mean, how did he spend his days?"

Signor Galamini shrugged. "He did what everybody else does; he took walks."

"But you never even saw him?"

"Hardly. Anyway, at that time I was living in Naples. My father stayed here, to look after the pensione."

"Ah, Signor Galamini, I feel that in this pensione I'll write a novel worthy of . . . Ibsen!"

Signor Galamini sighed, picked up his ledger, as if to indicate that the private, expansive part of the conversation was over. He said: "Then I'll give you number 12, a double room with two windows over the garden and a view of the sea."

"Thank you, thank you, thank you, Signor Galamini. You've saved my life."

"Here's the key. Carmelo, show the gentleman to room 12. Ah, just a moment. Your identity card."

I held out my identity card and, to take it, he extended a small, white hand, all dotted with brown age spots. My gratitude was so strong that I felt a temptation to kiss that hand. Signor Galamani must have sensed it, because he frowned, staring at me in amazement. I went on, hastily: "By the way, do you know if a German couple, the Müllers, have arrived just now, husband and wife; she's very young, with red hair; he's a man of about forty, stout, tall, heavy?"

It was a trick: inventing, on the spot, the very ordinary name of Müller, I was forcing Signor Galamini to correct me and to reveal the couple's real name. To my great amazement, after glancing over the ledger for a

moment, Signor Galamini said: "Yes, they've arrived. About half an hour ago. They have number 8."

"Their name really is Müller?"

With some surprise, he answered: "Müller is what's written here. That's all I know."

I felt a boundless happiness, both because of the fact that I now knew "her" name and because I guessed it at first try, which seemed to me a good sign, miraculous. True, in Germany Müller was a very common name, like Rossi in Italy; but its being so common didn't mar my happy feeling of luck, like a gambler who wins a huge sum on his first bet. For that matter, my luck didn't lie so much in my having guessed the name of the couple as in having had the idea of using the ordinary name to discover the extraordinary name that, at first, I had imagined she would have. I felt that, in all decency, I couldn't ask Signor Galamini for the woman's first name as well. I took the pen, rapidly filled out the form which I handed back; he slipped it into the cubbyhole along with my identity card. Then I went toward the steps, following the porter, who was carrying my suitcase.

II

Once in my room, I put my suitcase down on one of the two beds, opened it, and began distributing my belongings between the chest of drawers and the wardrobe.

The room was very big and a bit gloomy, its vaulted ceiling decorated with grotesque paintings; the two windows Signor Galamini had boasted of looked down on the garden; the furniture was old, dark, provincial nineteenth-century. Since it was a twin-bedded room, everything in it was double: two dressers, two wardrobes, two night tables, two screens behind which stood two washstands with the appropriate pitchers and basins. As I put away my things, I was already thinking about what I should do to approach Frau Müller. From Signor Galamini I had learned casually (or perhaps it was not

casual, perhaps the proprietor had guessed the real reason behind my anxiety) that the couple was staying in number 8. Therefore, as I was in number 12, I could deduce, since there were two rows of doors, that they were on my floor. Now, I had taken a look at the way the numbers ran and had noticed that the bath was to the right of my door, at the end of the corridor; consequently, Frau Müller, from number 8, to go to the bath had to pass my room, inevitably. This prospect suggested various possibilities: one, to lurk behind my door and, as she went by, seize her by the arm and draw her inside; two, to call her, look out, and make a date for the next day; three, to confine myself to peering at her through the crack of the opened door, say nothing, and leave the initiative to her. These plans, apparently so rational, disturbed me deeply. I came and went between suitcase and drawers, shifting my things, as in a dream, almost unaware of what I was doing.

When I had emptied the suitcase, I arranged my books and papers on the writing table, an old walnut desk like a provincial notary's, pocked by woodworms and stained with ink. First of all, my German dictionary; then the notebook with the almost complete translation of *Michael Kolhaas* by Heinrich von Kleist that I was working on; finally, the folder, alas very slender, which contained the first twenty pages of the novel of which I had spoken so enthusiastically to Signor Galamini. On a little shelf, near the door, I lined up the books I planned to read during my stay in Anacapri, a dozen in all.

I must say that, as I set the novel folder on the table, I couldn't help feeling a sense of guilt. I had made very little progress, yet it was not an ordinary novel, whose writing can be postponed to a future date, even a distant one. This was a special novel, connected with current

problems of my life and, in my present condition, absolutely necessary. Perhaps I should clarify this point.

As I mentioned earlier, for some years I had been obsessed by the idea of "stabilizing" despair. I suffered from a form of anguish that consisted, precisely, of hoping for nothing, either in the immediate or the remote future; my mind frequently played with the solution of suicide both as a liberation from anguish and as the logical, inevitable outcome of lack of hope. But, luckily or unluckily, we are not completely human; or rather, we are human only to a minimum degree, let's say two percent; for the other ninety-eight percent we are animals. Consequently, the suicide solution, so rational and human, was opposed by the animal, irrational part, not strong enough to dispel despair, but sufficient to prevent what the newspapers generally describe as a "despondent act."

In my spirit, the two percent of humanity alternated constantly with the ninety-eight percent of animality, so at times I felt suicide was as ripe as a fruit on a tree and I had only to raise my hand and pluck it; then at other times, such as now for example, after the encounter on the boat, I tended with every means toward the fulfilment of my desires. This contradictory alternation of despair and desire humiliated me. What? I was in despair, total despair; nevertheless, at the same time, I embarked, eyes closed, on the typical passions of my age!

In the end I got the idea that, if there had to be immobility, and there had to be contradiction, I might as well "stabilize," knowingly and deliberately, my despair. What did I mean by "stabilize"? Somehow, imagining my life as a Nation, to institutionalize despair, recognize it officially, in other words, as a law of that same Nation; all this thanks to an awareness that would allow me to

create an unshakable balance between despair and desire. But how to achieve this awareness? This is where the novel I planned to write came in. As I proceeded with the writing, my inner life would move away from the idea of suicide, while remaining focused on that of despair. And this would occur because, in the novel, in fact, I would tell the story of a man who ends up killing himself; in other words, I would transfer onto the page what remained only an intention in life. Thus, through the practice of literature, I would attain a state where my despair, now "stabilized" because it was ineffectual, would become what I firmly believed it should be, in our time: the normal condition of existence.

Though I felt all this was necessary, indeed indispensable, if I was to go on living, still it was only an outline, something similar, that is, to a skeleton that had to be clothed in flesh or, if you prefer, a narrative notion that had to be articulated and worked out in a story, with situations, characters, settings, etc.

That's when the difficulties began. I realized, in fact, that to establish a character on whom I could unload the obsession of suicide, the generic motivation of his despair was not enough; I had to find the reason behind that despair. After long reflection, I finally identified this reason as his unswerving opposition to the Fascist regime, which, in that June of 1934, was entering its twelfth year in power. This, surely, was a plausible reason for despair in a character in a novel; but, as far as I personally was concerned, I knew very well that, even though I felt the same aversion, I would certainly not have killed myself because of the political regime then dominating Italy.

On sober reflection, indeed, it seemed to me that suicide, at least in my case, was what might be called a

"prepolitical" temptation, to which politics could at most add another reason. In reality, I thought, I would have felt just as despairing if Fascism were to fall or even if the whole social system changed. But my protagonist, on the contrary, had to have a precise, concrete, and—especially—single motive for killing himself. If his motives were to be vague, abstract, and—especially—numerous, I suspected he would perhaps end up not killing himself at all, thus preventing me from stabilizing despair and forcing me to do directly in life what I had not succeeded in doing indirectly in my novel. No, my protagonist had to kill himself in order to allow me not to kill myself; and he had to kill himself because of a despair caused by a specific political motive in order to allow me to go on living in a despair without any motive.

As I pursued these reflections, I finished putting away my belongings. Then I went to the window and looked down at the garden, now shrouded in the shadows of twilight. I had a feeling of relief seeing the black, jagged mass of the trees outlined against the green evening sky, while, like a diamond on a woman's brow, a single star shone, vital and sumptuous. Outside the front door, illuminated by a pair of globe-shaped lamps, the woolly old white dog was calmly curled up. Farther down, below the open country, the sea was a blue-black strip that later would be illuminated by the white light of the full moon. All, in other words, was calm, serenity, habit. Who could tell? Perhaps as I had said to Signor Galamini, here I would really write the novel in which I would unload onto the protagonist my despair and its consequent suicidal temptation; here I would save myself through writing. Which, in the end, was nothing but a game; but who could ever say that in life a game matters less than so-called serious things?

On the other hand, I went on thinking, this sky which is so poetic, this star so vivid, these trees so mysterious owed their beauty to the very fact of being contemplated through the spectacles of an incurable and definitive melancholy. It would be despair, then, that would actually make me love reality, after having made it unbearable to me for such a long time.

Even in this state of literary rapture, obviously I was not forgetting Frau Müller. On the contrary, I saw her in the center of a great love, the greatest of my life, beside me in my battle against self-destruction. Or, to put it in humbler terms, even as I went on writing my novel, I would find in the relationship with her the confirmation that life, after all, was worth living. At that point, however, I couldn't overlook the fact that the steadying role I assigned to Frau Müller didn't exactly jibe with the sort of melancholy and fatal complicity I thought I had sensed in her attitude toward me during the brief, silent dialogue on the boat. But, all the same, I felt the need to fit into my life this mysterious woman of whom I knew nothing except that she had emerged from the void, specifically for me, it seemed.

All of a sudden, I heard the din of a copper gong that a waiter was carrying around from floor to floor of the pensione, striking it at regular intervals. The sound brought me back to reality, as the saying goes, or rather to the deeply troubling fact that, in a few minutes, I would see Frau Müller again in the dining room, where, no doubt, she and her husband would go down for supper. At this thought, my mind seemed all at once to darken; my heartbeat accelerated; my breath failed. Overcome by a sudden, hateful anguish, I left the window and went to sit down on the bed, telling myself I should wait till the servant had finished his rounds with

the gong, linger in my room another five or ten minutes until all the guests of the pensione had gone down to the ground floor: I didn't want to be the first to enter the dining room.

I decided to measure the duration of my wait by the time it took to smoke a cigarette. I lighted one and began to puff on it, scrupulously, without enjoyment. But I quickly realized that, if you're in a hurry, there are many ways to shorten the length of a smoke: taking long drags, inhaling frequently, constantly knocking off the ash, and so on. And in fact, well before the established five minutes had gone by, the cigarette was already reduced to a stub, which I crushed out in the ashtray. Then I put my hand on my knee and waited another three minutes, my eyes glued to the watch on my wrist. At last I sprang to my feet and headed for the door. But the moment I crossed the threshold, I turned around: I wanted to pick up a book to read at table, partly just to be doing something but also to use the book in somehow transmitting a message to Frau Müller. What message I still didn't know. Among the books I had arranged on the shelf there was *Also sprach Zarathustra.* I hesitated between the Nietzsche volume and the Kleist story I was translating; then I decided on the former: it was a very famous book; even an uncultivated person, as Frau Müller probably was, couldn't be unaware of it. Moreover, the Nietzsche book, with its brief verses, lent itself to the sending of an amorous message better than Kleist's story. I collected *Also sprach Zarathustra* and left the room.

Slowly, a step at a time, one hand on the banister, my book in the other, I began descending the broad, spacious stairway of the pensione. Other guests preceded me or followed me, almost all older people, chiefly married

couples and clearly foreigners, in all likelihood Germans, for the most part. I looked ahead of me for the Müllers, but didn't see them; then I stopped, bent down, and pretended to tie my shoelace, and while I was bent over I looked behind me: they were just at my back, he in a blue suit, a stiff wing collar chafing his throat; she in a dress of shiny green silk, with bows on the shoulders, emphasizing their bony thinness and the slenderness of her bare arms. His motionless, opaque gaze was concealed behind the glitter of his eyeglasses; but she, the moment I bent over and turned, immediately seized my gaze with her own. It was the same look she had given me on the boat: sad and despairing but, at the same time, determined and almost shameless. In my confusion, I untied my shoelace instead of tying it; then I stood up in haste and waved a vague greeting to which he didn't respond, though she accepted it with a secret flutter of her eyelashes. They went on ahead of me down the stairs; with one shoe tied and one not, I followed them, two steps behind.

Even as I continued to descend slowly, my hand on the banister, I was staring at her nape, diaphanous and delicate under the disheveled red locks, and I said to myself that her nape no doubt had the same luminous whiteness that red-haired women have in the groin and upper thigh: the hair that tumbled down from the half-loosened knot irresistibly suggested mussed, rebellious pubic hair. From the nape, my gaze moved down over her shoulders, masculine in their broad line, but of a feminine thinness, without any play of muscle, the skin smooth and relaxed like a sail without wind; and to her hips which, as I had already noticed, were wide though bony; and I was again struck by the awkwardness with which she moved them, an awkwardness that was almost

clumsy, as if she were not yet used to the idea of having changed into a woman from the adolescent she had been until yesterday. Her way of walking gave me such a strong sense of her intolerance of her own femininity that I suddenly had the impression that her body was not so much dressed as crudely covered; consequently, I was somehow entitled, without too many scruples, to deduce what I couldn't see from what I could: the small buttocks, skinny and white and in the void between the legs, the long, soft hairs of the sex. She must have sensed this indiscreet gaze of mine because, suddenly, she groped behind her, to adjust her belt over her waist. My gaze then, as if repenting its audacity, hastily moved down to her ankles: they were slim, with stockings that were loose or carelessly pulled up, so that they made folds. Around her right ankle she wore a rather broad gold chain which fell over her long, thin, big foot.

Occupied with these observations, or rather, these feelings, I came down the stairs as if in a dream. And, as in a dream, there I was, finally, proceeding slowly in the line of people gradually entering the dining room.

Some of the numerous tables were already occupied; I stopped in the middle of the room and looked around for a waiter who would show me my assigned place. He came over, in fact: a middle-aged man, very thin, with a thick crop of black, curly hair, magnetic blue eyes, and a big aquiline nose; and he hurried me toward a table not far from the door. Now, I had already seen that the Müllers were seated at a table quite far from the one the waiter was giving me; and, at the same time, I had noticed that, next to their table, another one was still empty. So I stopped the waiter and informed him that I preferred the corner by the window, where, as it happened, the Müllers were. The waiter was rushed; he simply led me

to the table and removed a card with the word "Reserved."

The moment I was in my place, I was served the first course. Then, both to appear nonchalant and, as I said, because I wanted to find somehow a message for Frau Müller, I put the volume of Nietzsche next to my bowl, and, as I ate listlessly, I began leafing through it. I had in mind some sentence, a verse. But I immediately realized it wouldn't be easy to extract from the poem of the superman a passage that would serve the humble, very human purpose of creating a tie between me and the woman I loved. Chapter followed chapter, and I skimmed them as a bird flies over an inhospitable region, seeking in vain a suitable patch of ground on which to light. In the end, there, my eyes paused at a poem which, when I had first read it, had made a special impression on me:

I was sleeping, sleeping—
From a deep sleep I awoke:
Deep is the world,
And deeper than in the day's thoughts.
Deep is its sorrow—
Pleasure—deeper still than suffering:
Sorrow says: perish!
But every pleasure wants eternity—
—wants deep, deep eternity.

I set my spoon in the bowl, picked up the book, and slowly read the poem again. Though I wasn't sure that Frau Müller knew Nietzsche and, still less, that she was able to understand and appreciate those verses, it seemed to me that the last sentence: "But every pleasure wants eternity—wants deep, deep eternity" was suited, if not to her feelings, of which I knew nothing, at least to

mine, of which, on the contrary, I was quite aware. What, in fact, was this pleasure that wanted eternity if not the pleasure of loving without, in doing so, shedding that despair which is, precisely, the realization of the endless void that is eternity? And, for that matter, it was that same despair, or rather, the sense of eternity, that made me love Frau Müller; without despair, perhaps, I wouldn't even have noticed her existence.

I raised my eyes from the book and looked at my neighbor, who was facing me, while her husband was in profile. She sat motionless, in an attitude of alert intensity, her elbows on the table, her hands joined, her chin resting on her hands; and she was looking at me. Her dish, with the first course, was still untouched; her husband had already devoured his serving; and her full dish made me realize that she had been looking at me virtually since I sat down; her face still had that same curiously contradictory expression in which melancholy seemed to mix with determination and intensity with calculation: strangely, it seemed she wanted to inculcate in me, by authoritarian means, her own feeling of desolation. Then her husband murmured something to her; I didn't hear the words but I grasped the tense, vibrant tone; without looking at him, she answered in a monosyllable, probably a "*Ja*" or a "*Nein.*" At this point, I was struck—as if by something inexplicable—by the fact that her husband, who had surely become aware of his wife's behavior toward me, didn't protest, didn't try to make her stop. Why, I wondered, did Herr Müller, who on the boat had shown his jealousy, now let her have her way, offering only a token opposition? And, for that matter, why did his wife have no hesitation about looking at me in this insistent, imperious fashion, despite her husband's presence?

Now I'd like to describe once again Frau Müller's gaze, referring this time to a work of art which I mentioned before, at the beginning of these reminiscences of mine: the Dürer engraving entitled *Melencolia.* I know that employing a work so famous may seem banal; but, nevertheless, there are occasions when the courage to risk banality is a sign of sincerity and authenticity.

So then, as Frau Müller looked at me with that singular, determined insistence, her eyes had the same dark and unhappy expression as Dürer's woman. In particular this expression seemed to be produced by the engraving's effects of light and shadow. As you probably recall, the grieving, meditative expression, characteristic of the so-called black choler, the humor of despair, is achieved, in the Dürer print, through contrasts of shadow and light, of white and black, variously nuanced. The face seems veiled by a thick, gray nocturnal air; the eye sockets are outlined in black; finally, the pupils are very black but the scleras, in contrast, are a distinct white. The contrast between the black of the sockets, the deep black of the pupils, and the white of the scleras, the whole, which is then surrounded by the nocturnal gray of the face, produces the special, anguished unhappiness of the gaze, as of someone aware of being trapped in a situation that cannot be modified or eluded, from which, therefore, it is vain to hope for any possibility of escape.

Now, as I have said, partly because of the somewhat scant, dim light in that corner of the room, partly because of the shadow cast over her eyes by her disheveled bangs, Frau Müller's big green eyes had the same expression as the eyes of the Dürer figure. There was, however, this difference: the Dürer figure is looking up toward the sky in what you might call an interrogatory manner, whereas Frau Müller, on the contrary, was staring hori-

zontally, directly at me, with authoritarian intensity and determination. But both Frau Müller and the Dürer figure expressed with their gaze the same emotion that the German master had called *Melencolia* and to which I, in a more radical and more modern definition, gave the name of despair.

But what kind of despair? The kind, I thought, inspired by the definitive renunciation of something that till then had represented the very reason of life. A renunciation which, in Dürer's engraving, as was clear from the numerous scientific instruments scattered around the female figure, concerned knowledge; and which, on the contrary, in Frau Müller, seemed to concern love and, more specifically, the love between her and me. As if she, with those looks, wanted to say to me: I love you and I know you also love me, but between us there will never be anything beyond the exchange of looks. A true, complete love between us is impossible.

Why did I give this interpretation to the expression in my neighbor's eyes? Chiefly because I could find no other explanation for the authoritarian character of her attitude which I described before. In her attention toward me, in fact, there was an almost pedantic quality apparently bent on imprinting firmly in my mind the idea that she did, indeed, love me; but that, at the same time, I was to harbor no illusions about this love. Look at me, but without speaking, without communicating otherwise: this was what she could give me and no more.

In the end, however, her husband did seem to become aware of our silent dialogue. I saw him lean toward her, as, unperturbed, she continued staring at me; and he spoke to her in a low, irked voice; I couldn't make out the words; he spoke too softly and hastily; but his attitude was of a man uttering specially keen, if not down-

right wrathful reproaches, certainly very articulate and motivated. It was clear, in other words, that the husband didn't approve of his wife's behavior. But then, I asked myself again, why had he put up with it for such a long time? The conclusion of this unequal quarrel, in which one of the litigants spoke and the other pretended not to hear, was also a surprise. The waitress arrived with the second course. The husband interrupted his diatribe and helped himself with absent, furious abundance. But his wife refused any food and then, abruptly, as if suddenly overcome by weariness, she slumped to one side, resting her head on the table on her bent arm, like someone who wants to sleep and be left in peace. It was an eloquent pantomime, whether addressed to her husband or to me, I couldn't make out. Herr Müller, this time, didn't protest; he merely cast a sidelong glance at his wife, but said nothing to her. Then he resumed eating with intent, choleric voracity.

All of a sudden, seeing her occasionally close her eyes as if in sleep but then reopen them and give me the usual glance, as if to make sure I was alert to what she was doing and to let me know that the sleep-pantomime was not for me but for her husband, I recalled the verses of Nietzsche which I had been pondering a little earlier and I was surprised by the coincidence between what they said and what she, certainly unawares, seemed to want to convey with her attitude. Yes, it was for her that Nietzsche had written "I was sleeping, sleeping, From a deep sleep I awoke"; as it was for her that I, though ignorant of the problems tormenting her, had brought the book to the table, meaning to find in it a message of love.

I picked up the book, opened it again, carefully reread the poem; then I looked at Frau Müller's head, with its

abundant red hair, resting in the hollow of her arm, among the silver, the dishes and glasses. And I remarked to myself that the poem was miraculously apt for the message I meant to send her.

But how was I to give her the book now, or at least make her notice it? I took my fountain pen from my pocket, underlined the verses, then propped the open book against my glass, as if to read it while eating. I planned to draw her attention to the book, the moment she raised her head. Later, with her help, I would find some way to slip it to her.

All at once, after a long interval, three waitresses emerged from the kitchen door, in the distance, carrying the dessert trays. The husband said something to his wife, something stupid and well-meaning, like: "Won't you have some cake? You're usually so fond of it"; and she, exactly like someone waking from a long sleep, half raised her head, revealing a dazed, bewildered face. I promptly pointed my forefinger at the book: I saw her catch my movement, then slowly and visibly express assent with her eyes. I picked up my pen again and wrote rapidly, beside the poem: "Let me know as soon as possible where and when we can meet." I had barely closed the book when her husband turned toward me.

In German, with strange, disconcerting politeness, he asked me: "Excuse me. Can you tell me whether you spell Nietzsche's name with a final *e* or an *ie*?"

Taken by surprise, for a moment, foolishly, I thought he was asking me this question seriously, perhaps as an excuse to start a conversation, the way people do in boardinghouses. But then, almost at once, I realized this was a sarcastic way of "putting me in my place," much as he had already done before on the deck of the boat, giving me their address in Anacapri. I remained silent

for a moment; she was looking at me meanwhile, apparently not the least embarrassed. Finally I said firmly: "I spell it with a final *e*, of course."

He retorted immediately: "I have the impression you would like to lend or perhaps give this book to my wife. Am I correct?"

"Actually, I was reading it; but if the book interests your wife, I'd be happy to give it to her."

He immediately rose, held out his hand: "You can give it to me." I picked up the book and gave it to him. He went back to his place, handed the book to his wife; then, addressing me, he said: "There. My wife thanks you. You do thank the gentleman, don't you?" His wife shrugged slightly, without speaking. Her eyes lowered, she leafed through the book; she found the page with the poem, where I had folded over the corner; she began reading carefully. All this took place before her husband's eyes, though, oddly, he made no effort to read my love message or to prevent his wife from reading it. Frau Müller finished reading, then dropped the book into a large bag hanging from the chair and resumed her contemplative attitude, her eyes glued on me. Her husband began to eat his cake, wielding his fork with angrily demonstrative movements.

I also took a slice of cake from the tray that the waitress offered me and I ate it slowly, with demure greed. She ate nothing; her plate was empty. The husband finished his cake, poured himself a half glass of wine, drained it in one draught, then picked up his napkin, rolled it carefully, and stuck the roll into the napkin ring. I also began to prepare to leave. I drank the wine left in my glass, folded my napkin twice. Abruptly, the couple rose from the table.

I remained seated and watched them without shyness

or discretion; I wanted to show I hadn't been "put in my place" by the "lesson" Herr Müller had meant to teach me. First the wife went past me. She gave me a brief nod and stopped a bit farther on, waiting for her husband. He took only one step, then turned toward me, clicked his heels, and stiffened in a military stance, at attention, his arm upraised in the Fascist salute. Not Italian-style, with the hand pointed skyward, but in the German fashion, the arm horizontal. I immediately understood the intention behind the gesture. After the sarcastic question about the spelling of the name Nietzsche, the husband was continuing his campaign against me, meant, it seemed to me, to put a distance between himself and his wife and to disclaim the slightest suspicion of complicity. I was to understand that he was a real husband, that he might have some reason to tolerate his wife's behavior but not to approve it. This time, however, the "lesson" shifted from the cultural plane to the political. It was a kind of challenge; he wanted to put me to the test, to see if I was a Fascist. But, I told myself, given the situation in Italy and Germany, with Hitler and Mussolini in power and their adversaries persecuted and destroyed, the challenge was not only intimidating but also dangerous. If I didn't return the salute, then I was an anti-Fascist, and in that case . . .

I had to make up my mind. He was standing before me, his feet together and his arm outstretched; and in a flash, with the speed characteristic of mental operations performed in a condition of necessity, I argued inwardly the pro and the con of accepting or refusing the challenge. In short, I could (1) ignore the Fascist salute, pretending not to see him or it; (2) respond with a polite nod, while remaining seated; (3) answer with an ambiguous salute, somewhere between a normal greeting

and a bow, as I stood up; (4) stand up and, with total orthodoxy, return the Fascist salute.

I repeat: I thought all this in no more than a second. Then, while I was still hesitating, my eyes rose above Herr Müller's extended arm and I saw her face behind her husband's back. She gave me an affirmative signal with her eyes, as if to tell me, yes, I had to respond to the salute. Was it an order or a plea? I couldn't have said. Surely, at that moment, it would be an act of complicity at a level far deeper than that of political opportunism. But what most convinced me to act in a fashion so opposed to my convictions was the thought that she was asking me to do it "for love of her." Somehow, with that affirmative sign of her eyes and head, she was saying to me: Yes, only for a moment, to please me, become a Fascist.

Slowly, I rose to my feet, slowly I raised my arm in the salute, I did it Italian-style, with my arm held vertically. At the same time, I looked toward her, in the hope of receiving a reward for this betrayal of my convictions; and, to my infinite joy, I saw her purse her lips for a moment, miming a kiss. Then she nodded her head and blinked her eyes as if to say: Until later. All this took the space of an instant, after which she moved abruptly across the room, her husband following her.

I sat down again; for the moment, the kiss she had blown me behind her husband's back was enough; rather than go after her, I wanted to ponder that kiss and the gesture of complicity that had followed it. What did that gesture mean? Obviously that she would meet me, in a little while; the two of us would be alone. But where? I pondered some more and thought I understood: the only way for her to see me without attracting her husband's attention was, as I had already calculated, to

leave her room on the pretext of going to the bath and, as she went by, to slip in my door. I had imagined all this a short time previously as something that might happen in a distant future; but the affair was developing in haste; everything was about to happen now, this very night, perhaps soon. The moment I decided Frau Müller's visit could be imminent, I immediately feared I might not be in the room when she came, and forgetting I had ordered coffee, I sprang up from the table, bumping into the waitress who, at that moment, was arriving with the little cup on a tray. Coffee spilled on my shirt; I apologized to the girl, bewildered and almost frightened by my violence, assuming full blame for the accident. Then I rushed from the room.

My supposition that Frau Müller would come "immediately" to my room proved less audacious than I myself had thought. Once in my room, I went straight to the chest of drawers and took out a clean shirt to replace the one I was wearing, all stained with coffee. I had barely slipped it on and was still buttoning it up in front of the mirror, when I heard a knock at my door. There she is, I thought; and I had the thrilling sensation of having entered a bewitched atmosphere where all the things I wished to happen did happen, promptly. "Come in," I exclaimed; and at the same time I tried to button my shirt as fast as possible and shove the tails into my trousers: I didn't want to be found untidy. But in my haste I thrust the first button into the second buttonhole and similarly bungled all the others, thus losing time, unbuttoning and rebuttoning my shirt. But, in the meanwhile, the door didn't open and there was no further knocking. At last, with my shirt still hanging out, I went to the door and flung it wide.

There was nobody there; but, somehow, the shape of

her person seemed still outlined in the air. I lowered my eyes and on the threshold I glimpsed a book, or, to be precise, I saw the volume of Nietzsche that Müller had obliged me to give his wife.

I picked it up, glanced to left and right along the corridor, then went back into my room. Who had left the book? She, surely. A servant would have waited for me to open the door. She, perhaps with her husband's mysterious assent, perhaps actually in the presence of that man at once so jealous and so complaisant. I went to the writing table, turned on the lamp, and opened the book to the page where I had underlined the two verses of the poem. Then I saw that the verses "But every pleasure wants eternity— wants deep, deep eternity" had been underlined again, but with this difference: I had used my blue fountain pen; Frau Müller, on the contrary, a red pencil. Further, still with the red pencil, at the end of the verses three emphatic exclamation marks had been added. Book in hand, I went and sat on the edge of the bed.

So then: she not only confirmed her complicity, but with those red lines drawn under my blue lines, she apparently wanted me to understand that this complicity would be transformed as soon as possible into something more intimate. The reader will smile, I know; but the fact that the red lines she had drawn were *under* my blue lines suggested to me, by analogy, a forthcoming submission, in our amorous embrace, of her body to mine. Yes, there was no doubt, it was now a matter of hours or, at most, a day or two; and then our bodies would be superimposed one on the other, like the lines beneath Nietzsche's verses.

I pulled up my legs, stretched out on the bed, my hands clasped behind my nape and my eyes trained on the ceiling. What did the word *eternity* mean for that

unhappily married girl? As for interpreting the word *pleasure*, I felt there were no difficulties. Pleasure could be anything that, in fact, produced pleasure, from the silent dialogue of our eyes to the physical union I thought adumbrated in the double underlining of Nietzsche's verses. But eternity? For Frau Müller this word must have had a vague and probably banal meaning, like that of those sentimental picture postcards where, against a garishly colored background, words proclaim the promise of "eternal" love. But what if this notion were wrong? What if Frau Müller, against all probability, were an intelligent reader of Nietzsche? What then was the meaning of the red lines and the three exclamation marks under the word *eternity*?

These questions echoed inside my head without finding an answer and, probably, without even expecting one. I was happy. Happiness befuddled my mind like a strong, unaccustomed liquor. A voluptuous drowsiness was slowly invading me; more and more listlessly I was repeating to myself the question about Nietzschean eternity; finally I fell asleep. I slept very deeply, like the sleep in Nietzsche's poem, without dreams and for a time that seemed to me brief; but when I woke with a start and looked at my watch, I discovered it was almost midnight: I had slept three hours. I swung my legs down from the bed, stuffed my shirttails into my trousers, and went out of the room.

The stairs were deserted: nobody on the landings, nobody in the still-lighted entrance hall. Signor Galamini was standing behind the front desk, reading a newspaper. Almost without thinking, I went over to him and asked: "Have you seen the Müllers by any chance?"

I was expecting an evasive answer. Instead, to my surprise, he looked up from his paper and, after studying

me for a moment, he said: "They went out after supper and haven't come in yet."

"They must have gone for a walk?!"

Signor Galamini didn't answer; he started to resume his reading. I went on immediately: "Did your father ever tell you where Ibsen went on his walks up here at Anacapri?"

Signor Galamini raised his eyes, looked at me, and waited a moment before replying: "Yes, we know that. He went to a specific place."

"Which?"

"La Migliara."

"What's La Migliara?"

"There's a belvedere over the sea, a broad panorama."

"And what did Ibsen do at La Migliara?"

"He used to sit on the bench, facing the view, and stay there for hours, looking at the sea."

"For hours?"

"Yes, hours, even a whole afternoon."

There was a silence. Signor Galamini, very slowly and cautiously, shifted his gaze back to this paper. Suddenly I said, with eccentric inspiration: "Did you know that Nietzsche, in a poem of his, says that every pleasure wishes for eternity? I'm convinced he was referring to the contemplation of the sea. It's a great pleasure, looking at the sea; at the same time, the sea inspires a feeling of eternity."

Signor Galamini was not the least amazed by my abrupt and to him inexplicable shift from Ibsen to Nietzsche. He answered politely, smoothing his beard: "We have a photograph of Nietzsche, too, in the parlor. No doubt what you say is true. Particularly since La Migliara is a very special place."

"Why?"

"Years ago there was a suicide that made a profound impression. An Anacapri girl threw herself down from La Migliara. Like this: she stood on a spur of rock over the void, tied her braids over her eyes, so she wouldn't see, then she jumped."

"What made her kill herself?"

"Love, obviously."

I said good night to him brusquely and went back up to my room.

III

And then nothing happened. Two days went by and Frau Müller didn't come to my room, didn't send me a message, didn't even try to speak with me. But, inexplicably, she continued staring at me during our meals with those despairing eyes of hers, insistent and imperious. Her husband, for his part, continued behaving in the way I've already described, with a mixture of snarling complicity and ill-concealed rebellion.

Naturally, during those three days, while I went on doing the usual things that make up resort life, I tried to explain to myself the mystery of those two parallel and different attitudes. I realized that she "was doing it on purpose," whereas her husband was "forced to do it." But beyond this rather obvious notion, I couldn't proceed.

For a moment I thought I had encountered a so-called perverse couple, in which the wife lured men on and her masochist husband stood by and watched. But I quickly rejected this hypothesis: the husband's jealousy seemed at least as genuine as the wife's despair.

It also occurred to me that the wife might be flirting with me to make her neglectful and unloving husband jealous. But I abandoned this idea, too, no sooner than I had conceived it: the husband was clearly in love and there was no need to provoke his jealousy. It had already existed, even before I met the couple on the boat.

There remained, as I told myself finally, the most likely hypothesis, which was tantamount to no hypothesis at all: namely, that here was a unique situation, totally special, in other words something that could not be derived from what was already known, what had already happened, and therefore could not be reconstructed according to logic. A situation, in other words, so irregular and anomalous that it couldn't be explained a priori but could only be lived through, day by day, postponing the explanation until the end of the experience. So then, I told myself at this point, I had to live out my strange adventure to the very end, not trying to explain it, at most trying to remain aware of it as I was living through it.

These considerations, in any case, didn't alter my feeling for Frau Müller. I was assailed by doubts: in my room, on the beach, as I was swimming, during my walks. But I had only to sit down at the table and see again the two great green pupils staring at me, gloomy and despairing from beneath the disheveled red bangs, and again I found the deep and murky emotion of our first encounter. I would have liked to refuse the dialogue of our eyes, attend only to eating and then leave

the dining room without having lifted, even once, my gaze to her; but it was impossible. There was always a moment when my glance met hers; and then the mute conversation resumed, composed, on my part, of specific questions, and, on her part, of ambiguous answers. And all this, always, before the eyes of her husband, who intervened now and then, engaging his wife in angry, whispered argument. After the argument, during which she confined herself to monosyllables, everything was as before: she went on staring at me; her husband released his own fury by making those gestures, at once inexpressive and conventional, which characterize conjugal quarrels: slamming the glass down on the table, or pointedly rearranging the silver, or eating with excessive and angry voracity.

But what struck me most was always the authoritarian decision that emanated clearly from Frau Müller's sadness. How was it possible, I often asked myself, to exercise will power on a feeling as involuntary as melancholy? This inexplicable contradiction so fascinated me that I couldn't help looking at her: it was, as the saying goes, stronger than I. In her I sensed a tenacious and lucid determination that far exceeded the limits not only of ordinary coyness but even of passion. In her demeanor, in other words, there was something like a "plan" that seemed to be gradually carried out, without any hesitation or imprecision. And then, the third day after my arrival, an incident took place, to confirm this impression of mine.

Immediately after supper I went out and headed for the village, walking along the main road. I felt in an unusual mood, different from my usual static and desperate daydreaming; and this was because, that same evening, at a certain point, exasperated by the unswerv-

ing insistence of Frau Müller's looks, I had decided to "do something." What I was going to do was not entirely clear to me. But what was quite clear was my determination to emerge as quickly as possible from this dead-end situation. Yes, I would do something, no matter what, at whatever cost, even at the risk of destroying that nascent tie and returning to solitude.

I had noticed that every evening after supper the Müllers went out for a short walk before retiring to their room. I decided to follow them at a distance and then, in a way I wasn't yet capable of imagining because I meant to allow the circumstances to guide me, I would confront the girl and force her to make an appointment with me, for us to meet alone, without her husband's embarrassing presence.

So I caught up with them on the main road and began following them, a few steps behind. They were walking slowly, in an easy, relaxed manner, as you stroll when you have no destination and want simply to enjoy the beautiful evening. Preceding me, they displayed, as they often did, an affectionate intimacy. I observed them for a long time, convinced they hadn't seen me. They walked with their arms around each other, in a close embrace. His arm was around her waist, as if to support her and direct her; her arm lay diagonally across his back, her hand on his shoulder, as if to grasp it for support. This position forced Frau Müller, in an awkward but fond pose, to rest her head against her husband's chest; and, at the same time, to twist her broad, bony hips toward the big, athletic body walking beside her. It was, in short, an unequal embrace between a burly, sturdy man and a thin, fragile woman.

As I said, I thought they hadn't seen me; but I was wrong. Suddenly she turned her head and gave me a long

and expressive look, in which her regular unhappiness, so to speak, seemed doubled by an unhappiness totally of the moment, as if she were saying: You see what I have to put up with now. But her husband noticed this glance and made a meaningful gesture: without letting go of her waist, he held her chin with two fingers and turned her face toward him. There followed a subdued quarrel between him, apparently reproaching her, and her, excusing herself. By now we had come to the church square. The Müllers dissolved their embrace and went into the café.

I paused a moment, to give them time to pick a table and sit down; then I followed them inside.

The café was long and narrow, the line of tables facing the counter. At it, chatting with the barman, only one customer was standing, a short man with very broad shoulders and a big head of black curls. The Müllers had already sat down at the table placed nearest the radio. For a moment I pretended to hesitate, then I went and sat down at the table next to theirs.

There was a newspaper on the table. I picked it up and acted as if I were reading it. I held the paper at the level of my eyes, and for a bit I didn't see the couple. Then, very slowly, I lowered the paper and, at once, there was the familiar gaze, unhappy and stubborn, staring directly into my eyes. I raised the paper again, pretended to read for a while, then lowered it once more: the gaze was still there, as it had been a little earlier in the dining room, as it had been every evening and every noon during meals for the past three days. I looked at her husband. With a manner too intent and exclusive not to be a pretence, he was turning the dial of the radio.

What to do? I had decided to act but now that my

action could no longer be postponed, I didn't know how to carry out my decision. I could adopt what might be called the strong approach, straightforward and direct; that is, confront them both and ask for an explanation. Or else, on the contrary, renounce the confrontation, address only Frau Müller in an indirect, dissimulated fashion. The first course tempted me, not least because it would allow me to clear up the mystery of the husband's behavior; but I realized that, on the contrary, I had to follow the second, and for a very good reason: Frau Müller seemed openly to prefer it. In any case, the first approach involved the risk of a definitive break; for the present at least, I wanted to avoid that at all costs.

So I chose the humble, traditional stratagem of all adulterers since the beginning of time: I would write her a very explicit note and would pass it to her stealthily, trying not to be seen by her husband.

No sooner said than done. I tore a little page from my notebook and rapidly wrote on it these words, in German: "I absolutely must speak with you. I'll leave my door ajar tonight. Pretend to go to the bath and come to my room. At any hour, I'll be waiting for you."

I put the notebook back into my pocket and sheathed my pen. Now to find a way of passing the note to her. But how? I asked myself this question, then I looked up at her, and then, as I saw her staring at me with the usual sad and imperious gaze, all my vows of prudence were swept aside by an overwhelming impatience. All at once I rose to my feet, went to the Müllers' table, made a short, Germanic bow, and then asked the husband, politely but firmly: "May I sit here with you? There is a radio broadcast I would also like to hear."

His whole body was twisted toward the radio, while he adjusted the dials. He turned only his head and gave

me a long look, as if he didn't recognize me and were trying in vain to remember who I was. I saw in his eyes, even through the glare of his glasses, a gaze shining with fury; I prepared myself for a quarrel, even for physical aggression. But nothing happened. With a visible effort, the husband slowly shifted that piercing gaze away and turned his head again toward the radio, exactly as if I hadn't appeared and hadn't spoken, and he had neither seen me nor heard me.

The note was in my pocket. Now or never, I thought: this was the moment to deliver it. Her husband couldn't see us. So I turned toward the wife and very simply held out the note, confident that she would be prompt to grab it. But I was mistaken; Frau Müller, too, pretended to notice nothing. Not glancing at me, she extended her hand to the table, took her glass, and raised it to her lips. So the pair of them had agreed to ignore me! With a sudden flare of anger, I crumpled the note, flung it on the ground, and went back to sit at my table.

As I have already remarked, in the café, besides the Müllers and me, there was one other customer, the short, stocky man with the big curly head hunched between his shoulders, who was talking to the barman. He was at the end of the counter, so he could observe both my table and that of the German pair. Thus, as I realized from the darting curiosity of his eyes, he had missed none of that singular and inexplicable episode of the note. Now, with sudden decision, this customer moved from the counter and approached the husband.

He bent forward a little and said to the husband in Italian, but with a strong Caprese accent: "Germany? You want to get Germany? Let me find the station for you." With this, he put his big head beside the German's and reached for the radio dials. But, as he bent over, he

gave me an encouraging glance, as if to say: Go on! Now's your chance.

But my chance for what, seeing that both husband and wife had pretended to ignore my presence? In this puzzlement, I lowered my eyes and noticed that the note which I had crumpled and thrown on the ground had landed near Frau Müller's foot. Then it occurred to me that perhaps she had ignored me for a reason different from her husband's; he, out of hatred; she, on the contrary, to avoid betraying herself. Out of love, in other words. And so, I thought finally, nothing was really lost. I had to wait for the propitious moment, when she would judge it possible to bend over and pick up the note without attracting Müller's attention. But what could be done to keep Müller from noticing?

Incredibly, it was the radio, which Müller and the customer were fiddling with, that came to my aid.

First, in the stillness of the café, some loud music exploded, at once martial and sentimental, then after a long, deep silence, a single, remote voice of authority uttered a few imperious words, calling up, as if by magic, a vast, collective place, a congress hall or a parade ground, crammed with a packed and alert crowd. This voice told me nothing except the obvious fact that it must be speaking at a rally of the National Socialist Party and that the voice in all likelihood belonged to some high party official. It was not Hitler's: I knew his voice all too well. It must, however, have been that of someone important, because Müller immediately evinced a special interest: he warmly thanked the customer who had helped him find the station; he leaned closer to the radio. In this position he was turning his back on his wife, who, herself, had not moved and was still staring at me with the usual, disconcerting insistence. Here, I said to myself,

was finally my chance. I frowned, in an imperious expression, I jerked my chin to point out the crumpled note there at her feet, as if to urge her to pick it up. I expected her to bend down, reach out, collect my message. Instead, enigmatically, she didn't move.

At this moment a kind of torture began for me, provoked by the alternation of two different and concomitant sufferings: the one caused by the voice of the unknown Nazi official speaking from Germany; and the other one I couldn't help feeling in the face of the girl's incomprehensible attitude. Now, again, I tried to indicate to her, with my eyes and my chin, the little paper ball, the note, motionless near her foot; now, deceived in my hope, I turned my eyes away from her face, I assumed an indifferent attitude, and then, immediately, the official's voice filled my ears, despite myself. Curiously, an idea at once stupid and obsessive came back to me every time I was forced to hear the radio voice: If it were at least Hitler! But to be forced to listen, here in this godforsaken bar of Anacapri, to the raving of some petty boss from Mainz or Lübeck! It's too much!

Obviously, I was no longer thinking straight: the radio voice, the girl's stubborn refusal to cooperate, the husband's inexpressive back, the indiscreet gaze of the customer, who, leaning on the counter, continued observing us: everything contributed to confound me. In my rational moments I told myself I was a fool, that I should simply get up and leave. But I remained seated; I kept hoping that finally she would bend over and pick up the note.

We went on like this for almost an hour: Frau Müller insistently staring at me and ignoring the message that awaited her hand, there, on the floor; her husband, bent to the radio, smoking a short, thick cigar, listening

gravely and from time to time nodding with approval; the Nazi official yelling from Germany; the customer, still leaning on the bar, continuing to watch us.

Then, all of a sudden, the stalemate was broken, and the situation precipitated toward an unforeseen solution. The official abruptly ended his speech; his single voice was followed by a vast, endless, collective outpouring of applause; Herr Müller turned off the radio and swung around toward his wife; she bent over, picked up the note, unfolded it, read it, and then, with the greatest simplicity, passed it to her husband. Who read it, in his turn, then set it on the table, stood up, with a great show of calm decision. He had heard the official's speech: the evening was over, it was time to leave.

I was so furious, with a fury, however, more amazed than aggressive, that I wasn't able to look anywhere but at the dear triangular face half hidden under the abundant red hair. And so, with a feeling, at once gratified and revolted, of irresistible puzzlement, I watched her also get up, take the note from the table and go off after her husband. But as she passed me, she held the note to her lips and cast me a distinctly pleading glance, as if to say to me: Don't be angry. I had to do it, but I love you.

I remained seated at my table, deep in a complex mood where rage and hope mingled, frustration and joy. The squat, curly-haired customer came over and said to me: "Pretty girl, eh, that German!"

And so he considered himself somehow my accomplice in the adventure with Frau Müller; he had helped Müller find the radio station, he had seen to it that the man was distracted from his wife and me. And, after all, weren't we two Italians linked by the same Casanovian concept of woman? I said sharply: "Sorry, I must go. I have something to do." I got up and left the café, almost running.

IV

The next day I took the bus from Anacapri down to the place called Due Golfi; then I descended on foot the short cut from there to the beach, the Piccola Marina. My mood was the same as the evening before: between frustration and hope. But if I made the effort to consider my situation objectively, I couldn't hide the fact that my relationship with Frau Mülier hadn't progressed a single step since the moment I saw her for the first time on the boat. Then I told myself bitterly that I would have nothing more to do with the couple. This decision, however, as I already noticed on another occasion, seemed to redouble my basic and familiar despair with another despair that I might call supplementary and contingent. In reality, I was at this point mysteriously attached to Frau Müller and I couldn't bear the prospect

of no longer seeing her, even in the disappointing, ambiguous way that so far had represented our actual relationship.

The short cut that leads from Due Golfi to the Piccola Marina is a brick path winding down to the sea among dry walls of large gray stones, under luxuriant vines and green hordes of prickly pear. Every so often a carob extends over the path, its shade allaying the lash of the sun; and every so often between the bars of a gate you catch a glimpse of a villa's façade, at the end of an ascending allée. Like all short cuts, the Piccola Marina path at regular intervals intersects the main road that it abbreviates; at these intersections the walker has to cross the road, to pick up the short cut again on the other side.

Now, as I reached the first of the short cut's intersections with the main road and looked left and right before crossing, I saw, up above at the curve, a carriage coming toward me, heading down toward the Piccola Marina. In the carriage I immediately recognized Müller and his wife, sitting side by side.

Immediately I felt the joy, profound and at the same time prudent, of the hunter, who, after roving at length through the forest, all at once comes upon a clearing and sees the animal he has been seeking, tall in the grass, in the sunlight. So, I couldn't help thinking, at the very moment when I was swearing I never wanted to see Frau Müller again, actually I was seeking her, or rather, to continue the analogy, I was hunting her. This reflection convinced me to stop resisting such a tenacious and deep attraction. I paused at the side of the road and waited until the carriage reached the spot where I stood.

A carob, stretching over the road a branch laden with leaves, probably prevented the Müllers from seeing me. For my part, on the contrary, I had only to draw back a

little in order to glimpse the horse with his blinders and his harness, the driver seated on the box, the carriage with its great wheels, and the couple settled in the back of the carriage. Müller was on the far side, his wife on mine. I noticed that the husband was watching the landscape; I couldn't tell where she was looking: a huge pair of dark glasses hid her eyes. Then I thought that if I wanted to be sure that Frau Müller saw me, I should first of all make her remove her glasses; otherwise, we would be unable to communicate even with the silent dialogue of our eyes, which now, forgetting all my wise decisions, I was eager to resume. The carriage came nearer; I could clearly see the triangular, feline face blinded by those two enormous lenses of the most hermetic black; and meanwhile, in great haste, at random, I was formulating plans to make her take off her eyeglasses: to step forward, waving one arm, and ask for a lift; to cross the road forcing the carriage to an abrupt stop; to call out some name or other in a loud voice, stopping the carriage, then apologize for my mistake. Now the Müllers were very near. She was turning her head toward me; but, because of those damned black glasses, I couldn't tell whether she was looking at me or the carob or some other insignificant object and then . . . then a kind of miracle occurred: Frau Müller raised her hand and, with a slow elegance all her own, she took off the glasses.

The first impression, oddly, was that of an immodest act, a provocative and mischievous exhibitionism. As if, rather than remove her eyeglasses, she had unbuttoned her blouse and displayed her bosom, telling me with this gesture: Our bond is based on our eyes. So far, we have loved each other with our eyes. Perhaps you were afraid I no longer loved you. Here, to reassure you then, are my "naked" eyes.

And in fact our gazes met across the blue air of the morning; and, as if, in meeting, they were transformed into two mouths eager to mingle and penetrate each other, I felt, in that encounter, a troubling sensation of physical intimacy. Then Frau Müller, apparently to confirm that she had removed her glasses for me and for me only, put them back on her nose. The carriage passed the tree behind which I was hiding; soon I saw only the wife's great head of red hair and the husband's little bald head peeping above the back of the seat.

Then I had an idea truly worthy of a young man in love: I conceived a game. I would race as fast as I could down the short cut to the point where it next intersected the main road; I would wait once more for the carriage to pass me; once more I would force Frau Müller to take off her glasses. Then I would do the same thing at the third intersection and then at the fourth if there was a fourth and so on down to the paved open space at the Piccola Marina, where short cut and main road became one.

Determined, and yet dubious because I felt I was acting in the grip of a kind of delirium though I couldn't help but act, I crossed the road and began to run down the short cut between the little gray stone walls. I knew it was unnecessary to run because the horse was proceeding almost at a walk; but I was anxious to reach the crossing well before the carriage, not to be deprived of the singular pleasure of seeing it appear at the top of the road, as if fulfilling a specific desire of mine.

I arrived breathless and waited a long time before I saw the carriage appear up above at the curve, such a long time that for a moment I feared that, by some malignant magic, it had already gone past. But it did appear; and then I discovered, to my dismay, that, because of the

curves, this time the husband would be on my side and the wife toward the road. Of course, I could cross the pavement and lie in wait for the carriage at the next entrance of the short cut rather than at this exit. But I no longer had time to do it without the Müllers' noticing; and that would mean destroying the casual character of the meeting, revealing I was doing it deliberately, and, in short, perhaps irritating the ambiguous Frau Müller and causing her not to remove her glasses.

What to do? I hesitated for a long time, so long that, by now, the carriage was about to pass me; then I made up my mind on the basis of this consideration: It's too late to give the impression of chance. So much the better: this way she can have no doubt about my intentions. And I rushed across the pavement, almost grazing the horse's nose as I ran. The driver pulled on the reins to avoid running me down; the carriage stopped.

This time, to my almost incredulous joy, my shameless behavior found its counterpart in an equal shamelessness from Frau Müller. The driver, enraged at my imprudence, now was berating me from his high box, making an expressive gesture, pointing his finger at his temple. "Are you crazy? Throwing yourself in front of the horse with the whole road empty?! What came over you?" I made a vague gesture of apology; at the same moment, Frau Müller slipped her glasses off her ears, gave me a long look, then shook her head in the same negative movement she had addressed to me at our first encounter on the boat. The driver tugged his cap over his brow, shook the reins to set the horse trotting again; the husband turned and stared at me for a moment with an attention you might describe as scientific, like an entomologist studying some insect of an unfamiliar species; Frau Müller, on the contrary, turned back, without

glasses, to look at me a last time; then she put the glasses back on her nose. For a moment, I followed the carriage with my eyes as it went off; then I sped off again down the short cut.

I dashed headlong; even as I ran, I told myself that this time it wouldn't be necessary to cross the road; as at the first curve, I would have Frau Müller on my side and her husband on the other. This was a lucid thought; but I wasn't allowing myself any illusions: in reality, I was mortally aroused, with that almost ferocious sensation, as I said before, that a man feels out hunting; my lucidity served only to reassure me, to give me the impression that, even if I were behaving like a madman, there was a method in my madness.

Finally, there was the end of the path, there was the main road. The carriage was coming down at that very moment at a steady trot. I stopped, panting. I looked, I saw Frau Müller raise her hand for the third time to her glasses, and, without haste, lift them from her ears. Almost immediately, her husband ripped the glasses from her hand and threw them violently on the road. His wife shouted at the driver, in Italian, to stop; the driver pulled on the reins and the carriage stopped.

Frau Müller got out of the carriage, picked up the glasses in the middle of the road, saw that they were broken, and flung them again on the asphalt. Then she finished crossing the road and vanished down the short cut, on the side opposite the place where I was standing. Her husband also got out, hastily paid the driver, crossed the road, and also disappeared, after his wife, laboring under the weight of a large camera and a knapsack. Running, I hurried after them.

They were not far ahead. I covered a brief stretch of the path, I came around a bend, and there they were, a

few paces farther along, blocking my way. He was standing still, right in the middle of the path, while she was perched on the wall, swinging her legs in the air.

I slowed down, waved a brief greeting, and said "*Guten Tag*" in a calm voice, as if I considered them simply two fellow guests at the pensione, encountered by chance, and were greeting them out of normal politeness. But my implicit invitation to stick to conventional resort etiquette was not received. The husband replied with a "*Guten Tag*" charged with ill-repressed rage; then after an instant's silence, he went on: "Unless I'm mistaken, you wish to make the acquaintance of my wife. Is that so?"

Dumbfounded, I began: "Actually—"

"Save your breath. It is so. Therefore I will present her to you: her name is Beate, she is nineteen, her profession is theater actress. Anything else? Oh, I was forgetting: for you Italian men, what counts in a woman is the physical appearance. Well, even if Italian women, generally speaking, are very attractive, Beate, in my opinion, has nothing to envy your female compatriots." He was quiet for a moment, then, with a sudden movement, he grabbed Beate (as I shall call her from now on) by the arm and pulled her down from the wall. "Come here, Beate. It's true, I'm your legitimate husband, but I'm ready to cede my place to our Italian ally. However, he must know what's in store for him. So, before going, I would like to—how shall I put it?—to illustrate you. Now look at her, and tell me if Beate isn't a desirable woman from every point of view. Perhaps she's a bit thin and bony—she's still an adolescent—but this is a positive feature; you can tell she will become a splendid woman. I advise you, meanwhile, to pay special attention to the color of her hair and that of her eyes: a

beautiful contrast or, if you prefer, a beautiful harmony: the former red, the latter green. The nose is very small, but the nostrils are nicely flared. The mouth is large and fleshy, of original design, with the teeth widely spaced and very white: all this is enjoyable to look at. I won't speak of the body, which perhaps for you is the most important part; you'll see that soon enough, at the beach, in a bathing suit. I would like, however, to underline the breadth of the shoulders, downright Teutonic, ha-ha; and also the slimness of the waist, you can circle it with your two hands; finally, the length of the legs: a genuine ostrich! In short, an admirable exemplar of the German race, which you, connoisseur as you surely are, can appreciate at its proper value."

In this sarcastic description of Beate, what struck me most was a painful, pathetic quality, as if Müller, wishing to punish me with the usual moralistic and didactic "lesson," were himself the first to suffer from it and to feel punished by it.

For that matter, as I thought, the "lesson" was connected with the hardly flattering notion he had of Italian men, a notion that didn't surprise me because I knew it was widespread in Germany. But it irritated me because it shifted our conflict onto a false and unfair plane. Müller wanted to insult me, and I was already resigned, in advance, to allow myself to be insulted; but not with the usual arguments of nationalistic prejudice.

All of a sudden, while I was still asking myself if I should check the "lesson," Beate, with simplicity, removed her husband's hand from her arm and said, looking at him: "Well, don't you think it's time to go to the beach?" and without saying anything to me or giving any sign that she had been aware of my presence, she turned her back and quickly vanished. Müller hesitated

a moment, made a strange gesture toward me, half threat and half goodbye, then followed her.

Once more, what was I to do next? In effect, with her brusque departure, Beate had yet again prevented our rapport from going beyond the narrow and, in the end, tormenting confines of the dialogue of looks. Why hadn't she taken seriously her husband's sarcastic introduction, and shaken my hand and spoken to me the conventional words usual in such circumstances? Then, whether the husband liked it or not, we would have become a pair of so-called acquaintances, two people who from that moment on, according to the code of good manners, would be entitled to speak to each other as well as look at each other. But Beate hadn't done it; obviously she wanted to continue her provocative game.

At this thought, I felt a great desire to go back up to Anacapri on the first bus from the Piccola Marina. But I immediately rejected this demonstration of dignity, belated in any case, at the further thought that once at Anacapri, I would have sunk again into my usual despair, furthermore without even the enticing prospect of sharing it with her. Yes, I needed Beate, not so much as an excellent exemplar of the Teutonic race, in her husband's description, but as my similar, my alter ego, my double, in other words as the companion of this psychological adventure.

The idea, for me fascinating, of our parallel destinies finally made up my mind. I resumed walking, but without haste; I preferred to follow the couple at a certain distance rather than provoke, at least for the present, a new explosion of fury on the husband's part. There, at last, was the open space before the Piccola Marina. Some carriages were waiting, the horses immobile, their heads enclosed in blinders, bowed under the blazing sun, in a

sharp smell of urine. Beyond the little wall on which the drivers were sitting and chatting, the sea stretched to the horizon, cool, joyous, radiant. The confused, happy voices of the swimmers rose behind the varicolored roofs of the cabins.

I quickly went down the steps to the bathing establishment, to the rotunda where the restaurant was and where, as a rule, the beach attendant could be found. Meanwhile, I was wondering which cabin the Müllers might have. Obviously, my good intentions about being discreet had by now disappeared; I wanted to be as close to Beate as possible. The attendant was there, sitting at a table, an old man with a red face and a bloodshot, purplish nose. I went over and asked him if by any chance he had seen a German couple: a tall, heavy man, a very young girl with red hair; I had to know the number of their cabin . . . I thought fast, seeking some excuse that would involve the attendant, the Müllers, and me all at the same time; then, with sudden inspiration I concluded: "We're planning to hire a boat together. In fact, I'd appreciate it if you would get the boat ready right away." The trap worked. The attendant immediately told me the number of the Müllers' cabin and asked me if I wanted a small boat or a bigger one. A small boat, I said, then I asked him for a cabin myself, as close as possible to my friends the Müllers. The man handed me key number 15; the Müllers' cabin was number 16.

There were the cabins, painted red and blue, lined up along a kind of boardwalk suspended over the little harbor of Le Sirene; there was the terrace, of rough planks, with dozens of bathers' tanned, motionless bodies stretched out in the sun. I walked to door number 15; the door to number 16 seemed ajar. For some unknown reason, I had the immediate impression it had been left

ajar deliberately. Almost involuntarily, then, at the moment I was passing it, I gave it a gentle push. I had time just to glimpse the triangular and feline face beneath the red bangs, the white and nervous neck, the broad bosom with fairly enlongated and pear-shaped breasts, the broad bony pelvis with the pubes like a burst of flame in its center; then the door was slammed in my face, and I entered my own cabin. Like Beate, I didn't lock the door; I merely drew it shut.

I undressed in great haste; I wanted to leave my cabin before Beate left hers. But clearly Beate had the same idea. I had hardly taken off my trousers when my door opened and Beate appeared on the threshold. She shook her head once or twice, in a deprecatory fashion, looking at me, as she had at our first meeting on the boat; then she went away. I looked out, watched her as she moved off. Her step was springing despite the large bag she wore slung over her shoulder; the bony hips moved awkwardly, with nothing provocative about them: she really was an adolescent, with no thought of controlling her body's movements. When she reached the end of the platform she started slowly down the little wooden steps that led to the beach of Le Sirene. The last thing I saw was the mass of red hair, above the slim neck, between the square, bony shoulders.

I finished putting on my bathing suit, came out of the cabin, and walked to the end of the terrace. I began to skirt the little pebble beach that edged the inlet. I walked with bowed head under the blazing sun, taking pleasure in sticking my toes into the cold, damp gravel. All of a sudden I saw a pair of heavy, rotund calves of a glistening whiteness, and two huge feet, the toes stretched in the air. I thought, God knows why, of Müller and, in fact, on raising my eyes, I saw that it was actually he:

he was stretched out on the pebbles, a brief bathing suit over his loins, almost hidden by the big abdomen, the fat body as if flattened and broadened by the supine position. Our eyes met; I nodded a brief greeting and he responded with a similar nod. Once again I was amazed by his indifferent attitude. What had become of his fury of a little earlier? And why had it ended? I raised my eyes again and looked up at the rocky promontory that loomed over the little bay. Then, up there, standing erect on a spur jutting out over the void, where I knew there was a diving board, I saw Beate looking down, her eyes gauging the distance before she jumped. Then a bather approached her, his body standing out against the background of the sky. He and Beate exchanged a few words; she stepped aside; the bather climbed onto the board, joined his hands, and flung himself down in an impeccable dive. I thought: She didn't want to dive, she gave him her turn; that means she's waiting for me. And I promptly rushed off to scramble up the cliff.

I was mistaken. I had barely reached the top of the promontory when I saw Beate walking toward the diving board, holding something white in her hand. Then she lifted the white object to her head and I realized it was a rubber bathing cap. Beate pulled the cap on her head, raised her arms high, and flung herself headlong, her hands and feet joined.

I rushed toward the diving board, hopping as best I could over the spiky, porous rock; I leaned forward; far below, in the water still churning from her dive, Beate's head, white and tiny, seemed to be aimed toward the open sea. I assumed she would remain in the water a while for a swim; I wondered if I should follow her. I was about to dive also when my eyes lighted on some objects Beate had left behind on the cliff. I saw a rough canvas

bag with leather trim, a folded towel, a bottle of sun-tan oil, and, out of place on that porous rock corroded by the salt air: a book. I couldn't help sensing some kind of deliberate meaning in the presence of such an incongruous object; the meaning, for that matter, I had always noted in Beate's behavior. Then I abandoned the idea of following her into the sea, bent to pick up the book, and examined it.

I remembered the copy of *Also sprach Zarathustra* which I had employed to send my message; I wanted to see if this book was meant to serve the same purpose. I opened it and I saw that it was the collected letters of Heinrich von Kleist, the very author whose story, *Michael Kohlhaas*, I was translating at this time. I knew the letters very well, but all the same I was unable to divine the message that I was convinced had been entrusted to them. I leafed through the book, hoping to find again some page marked, some marginal note, but I found nothing. I was about to replace the volume beside the bag when, out of some strange curiosity, I decided to glance at the title page: there might be an inscription. And there was: "To my sister, to dearest Beate, from her loving Trude." I was vaguely taken aback: a sister by the name of Trude had given the book to Beate: but where was the message for me, in this inscription? And yet, as I thought with disappointment, there was no doubt that the book was there for me; I was sure of that, and the fact of not finding a message exasperated me oddly. I leafed through the book once again, I shook it to see if a note would fall out: nothing. Then, almost without thinking, I went to the board, joined my hands over my head, and dived.

I felt the impact of the water against my head; then I plunged deeper, my eyes wide, down down, into the

murky green glow of the sea, with the sensation that I hadn't dived for Beate and didn't desire to find her, but wished instead to descend farther and farther, until I settled on the sand of the seabed, like any piece of marine jetsam. Was this perhaps the eternity Nietzsche spoke of, this endless descent toward the night? Perhaps it was; perhaps now I had only to assist the descent until I had reached the place where I would lie forever.

This temptation lasted an instant. Then, with a rapid return to my real situation, I made the necessary movements with my arms and legs to regain the surface and, in fact, a moment later my head burst forth into the sun, and I found myself unexpectedly face to face with Beate. She must have come back from the tip of the promontory; sheathed and tiny in her white cap, her head seemed to make her shoulders broader, as they emerged from the water. I shouted immediately, violently: "The book! What does the volume of Kleist's letters mean?"

She looked at me and said nothing. I added in great haste: "I must talk with you, name a time and place. I'm in room number 12; we're on the same floor. Tonight I'll leave the door unlocked; I'll wait for you till morning." Once again she said nothing; the immobility of her face contrasted with the movements of her arms which kept her afloat. I went on: "Are you afraid? It's very simple: pretend you're going to the bath at the end of the corridor, then come to me." Another look, intense but immobile, as the movements of her arms continued. At a peak of rage, I shouted suddenly: "Why won't you speak? What's wrong? Can't you talk? Do you understand me, yes or no? I absolutely have to speak with you."

Then, finally, she spoke, in a naïve voice, fresh and clear, truly an adolescent's, a voice, moreover, that was

calm, reasonable, and somehow amazed. It surprised me strangely because, judging by her behavior till now, I had expected an irked, spiteful tone. "But I'm leaving tomorrow for Germany," she said.

I cried: "That's a fine surprise! And here I've been running after you for four days like a madman!"

I saw her shake her head, as if to reject my reproach: "My husband and I are going to Naples, where we're to meet my sister Trude and my mother. We'll spend a day with them, then we leave for Germany, and my sister and mother will take our place in Anacapri."

"And you're not coming back to Capri again?"

"Not this year, I believe. But I'll tell my sister about you, so when she comes to Capri, she'll look for you. She's my twin; she resembles me very much."

"But you can't, you mustn't leave—not yet."

"I have to, unfortunately. But please: try to see my sister."

I raised my voice, in a suddenly impassioned tone: "What do I care about your sister? I love you."

It was my first declaration of love, the first in so many words, after I had made so many to her with my eyes. But she received it with the reasonable attitude of a mother taking a slice of cake from a child's hands so he won't overeat. "Try to understand. It's impossible."

"What's impossible?"

"Love."

I said in a low, intense voice: "You've done everything to make me understand that you loved me. Actually you were just exploiting me to make your husband jealous."

I saw her shake her head. "Don't say that." She was silent a moment as if hesitating; then she added: "My husband horrifies me; his hands are stained with blood." This time I really was dumfounded. After so many eva-

sions and such elusiveness I wasn't expecting a revelation so direct and so brutal. But my amazement was mixed with relief: finally the mystery was being dispelled and I was learning something real about her. Hastily, overcome with emotion, I blurted, stumbling over my words: "But, in that case, you must. You understand? You must come to my room tonight. Then you'll leave, all right, but at least we'll have reached an agreement about the future."

I was struck, as I spoke, by the calm, pensive attention with which she listened to me and, as she listened, she observed me. Then, in a completely normal voice, she asked: "If I come to you, would you be ready to do a certain thing with me?"

She remained calm, with an air of serene and rational challenge. I stammered foolishly: "For you I'd do anything."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely sure."

"But you don't know what I'm talking about!"

"You'll tell me tonight when you come to me."

She looked at me intently, as if studying me: "But you should know it already: I've done nothing but say it to you the whole time with my eyes. And today I told you again, with the Kleist book."

I shouted: "The Kleist book! Then you really did put it there for me! But I didn't find any message."

"There was one, all the same."

"Then you'll come tonight?"

She hesitated, then confirmed: "All right. I'll come some time after midnight."

All of a sudden, over our heads, there was a piercing cry: "Beate!" Then, immediately afterwards, with a great slap of his belly against the water, splashing all

around, Beate's husband plunged down near us: obviously he had observed our conversation from the diving board above. "Beate, I've been looking everywhere for you," I heard him say then, amid his puffing and gasping, the moment he surfaced. I began to swim away from them and I didn't stop until I had reached the tip of the promontory.

V

I went back to the little bay of Le Sirene; I found the boat I had ordered all ready, rocking in the water. I climbed in at once and began rowing strenuously, heading out to sea. I wanted to reflect on my first "spoken" encounter with Beate, as it might be called. In fact, as soon as I had put some distance between the cliff and myself, I abandoned the oars, lay down on the bottom of the boat, and as it drifted with the current, I set to examining, word by word, the brief dialogue between Beate and me.

Now then, first of all, she had informed me she was leaving. She had told me in the calmest, most casual, most indifferent tone imaginable; and this, the first oddity, after she had told me with her eyes, for several days, the most impassioned and despairing things. And

as if this weren't enough, she had taunted me by announcing the arrival of her twin sister and almost advising me to console myself with her, since the two of them looked so much alike, as if love could be satisfied by the resemblance of a nose or a mouth. Was this the behavior of a woman in love?

But then, there was that terrible sentence: "That man horrifies me; his hands are stained with blood"; there was the promise to come to my room during the night. And, most of all, there was the ambiguous and mysterious question about whether I felt capable of doing, with her, tonight, a certain thing. The same thing that she had tried to tell me for four days with her eyes and, today, with the volume of Kleist's letters.

Kleist! At that name, a kind of enlightenment struck me. And I was overcome by a great uneasiness. Unable to remain still, I abruptly sat up again, collected the oars, and resumed rowing.

Kleist! Slowly, at the sound of that name, the truth opened out before my eyes, like one of those malefic, carnivorous tropical flowers whose petals open only to seize some insect which then, as the petals close, they will slowly devour. Beate had said that the thing we were to do together tonight was something she had tried to tell me with Kleist's letters. Now I was well aware that, like a river which collects water from many tributaries to flow on and empty into the sea, that collection of letters, written over a long stretch of time, actually flowed, through countless twists and turns, toward an unconscious and inevitable destination: suicide. And, further, not the usual solitary suicide; no, it was what might be called a Kleist-style suicide, a double suicide. Kleist, in fact, had killed himself on the shore of the Wannsee together with his mistress Henriette Vogel.

Nevertheless, I still had some doubts or rather some

incredulities. For one thing, why would Beate want to choose me in particular, a complete stranger, a chance passerby, to perform an act as serious and definitive as suicide? Kleist had killed himself with Henriette Vogel after having become her lover, after they had determined together and in agreement that their lives could have no other outcome; above all, after realizing that only death would set a seal of absoluteness on their love. But I? I knew something of Beate, I wasn't her lover, I had exchanged with her only a few hasty, ambiguous words. True, we had conversed with our eyes twice daily for four days. But while two people can declare their love with their eyes, it is much more difficult, if not impossible, for them to agree, through glances, to kill themselves together.

The more I thought about it, the more I was struck by the makeshift quality, the haste, the impatience that the double-suicide plan revealed. But, at the same time, in a contradictory fashion, the makeshiftness, haste, and impatience upset me as eloquent evidence of a genuine, obsessive need. Beate seemed to desire death with the same blind and indiscriminate yearning with which, at her age, a young person desires to make love: anywhere, with any man, at any moment, in any way. But then: why me precisely? Why not some other man?

The answer came to me at once, spontaneous and logical: because Beate had mysteriously sensed that among the many whom she could ask to take their life along with her, I was probably the only one who for a certain time had cherished a suicidal plan. This intuition of hers must have seemed confirmed, for her, by the fact that on introducing myself I boasted of having taken my degree with a thesis on Heinrich von Kleist, that very Kleist who, by all appearances, with his double suicide, must

long have represented, to her eyes, an example to be followed.

I suddenly stopped rowing, shipped the oars, and examined my position. I had rounded the promontory which, to the north, closes the bay of the Piccola Marina; all that part of the Capri coast invisible from the bay was now revealed to my eyes. In the distance, another promontory, with sheer cliffs and deep clefts, was outlined, misty and remote, against the sea. Between that distant promontory and the still-near one that I had only just rounded, there was a sequence of little inlets. One of these was just before my eyes, with its green water, shallow and transparent, and at the end, a beach of white pebbles surrounded by an amphitheater of red cliffs. I looked at the beach: I saw it was deserted. Now the sun was beating down hard; around me, the sea seemed to have multiplied its glints. I ran a hand through my hair and could feel my head burning. Then I bent toward the water and wet my hair. Afterwards, still not touching the oars, seated in the motionless boat, I resumed thinking about Beate.

So then, in her proposal of double suicide, there had been something more than the urgent need that drives us to exploit the first comer, if that exploitation will bring release. Mysteriously, there had been, on the contrary, an infallible choice, even if completely unaware and instinctive. I had been picked out among millions; it so happened that this selective operation had isolated, among so many, the perfectly suited man. But isn't this what usually happens in love? Isn't this instinctive infallibility what leads a man and a woman, who don't know each other and perhaps have never seen each other, to unite in the act of love?

And so, in my reflections, after having rejected Beate's

suicide proposal as something makeshift and hasty, now its makeshiftness and haste finally led me to accept it as evidence of what in everyday language goes under the name of *coup de foudre*, of love at first sight. To arrive at this conclusion, I had simply to replace the word love with the word death. Or, rather, I had only to feel that, in our case, love and death were the two indivisible and complementary faces of a single reality.

Naturally, all this was merely one among the many hypotheses that could be formulated. But perhaps, precisely because it was something hypothetical, I indulged in a kind of daydream about what might happen that night when Beate would come to visit me in my room.

Strangely, I realized at once, to my surprise, that the idea of double suicide neither frightened nor distressed me. It seemed to me a part of love, or at least of our love, mine and Beate's. As further proof of this, while I imagined our meeting in the room, that night, I was deeply moved by a desire which instead of being diminished by the prospect of suicide seemed to derive greater strength and depth from it. To tell the truth, in the immediate future awaiting me a few hours hence, I saw only the love act that would unite us, Beate and me; whereas the idea of the suicide which, with all certitude, would be its inevitable conclusion remained remote, as if postponed to a still-uncertain period.

But something was nagging at the back of my memory, or as the common expression has it, something was on the tip of my tongue, something connected with the sentence "That man horrifies me; his hands are stained with blood." All at once, I understood: Beate and I were both in despair, but the reasons for our despair were different. Beate, as her words made clear, was in despair for moral and perhaps political reasons, married to a husband

who horrified her because his hands were stained with blood, in a society that similarly horrified her, because it, too, was bloodthirsty and bloodstained. I, on the contrary, knew quite well that my despair was, so to speak, metaphysical. Whatever the political and social situation around me might have been, I was convinced I would have been just as despairing.

What did this mean? Again I concentrated, and finally I was able to formulate an answer. It meant that my despair was different from Beate's not only because it was inspired by different motives but also because, for some time, it had been directed toward a different solution. Beate wanted to carry despair to its logical solution, suicide; I, on the other hand, wanted to stabilize it, that is, find a way of living with it. To this end, as I said before, I had decided to write a novel whose protagonist killed himself for political reasons. In the prospect of a stabilized despair, this novel served as a lightning rod; the self-destructive violence of despair would be released on the page instead of in life. But now the encounter with Beate had nullified my little psychological-literary device. Beate, with the aim of a Kleist-style suicide, was, as they say in poker talk, calling me; she wanted to see my cards; she was telling me that my novel-card, with the hero killing himself in my stead, had no value. I could almost hear her saying as much with that fresh voice of hers, naïve and merciless: When someone is really in despair, he doesn't write a novel about suicide; he kills himself.

At this point I went back to rowing; quickly I entered the inlet. The water was shallow and transparent; the sandy bottom was visible, yellow and gray, dotted with white pebbles and black sea urchins. At intervals a gentle wave, like calm and steady respiration, lightly swelled

the surface, rippled toward the shore, and died on the pebbles, leaving a diaphanous, shining rim of foam. The boat's prow struck ground, scraping against the stones; I jumped into the water and, with two or three tugs, pulled the boat ashore.

I climbed a little way up the beach and sat down on the pebbles. The transparency of the water in the bay had given me an illusory impression of coolness. After a short while, I realized that the sun's blaze, reflected by the stones, was bothering me, impeding my thoughts. I stood up and looked around: not far from the shore, I saw a cliff like the wing of a stage set; behind it I could take refuge from the sun. I went there, sat down again, my head and back in the shade. At that same moment I glimpsed a boat coming into the bay.

I noticed immediately that, in the boat, there was Beate with her husband. He was rowing, his back to the shore; Beate, on the contrary, sat at the poop, facing me, and certainly she had already seen me. She was no longer wearing her cap: a yellow straw hat shaded her face with its broad, floppy brim. I stood up and, as I was sure her husband couldn't see me, I waved my arms, as if to say: I'm here. Absurdly, I was disappointed to see that she didn't return my greeting: she couldn't because she had her husband facing her; but, all the same, I felt our dialogue of a little earlier justified any imprudence by now. The boat sped straight for the shore; its prow thudded among the stones. The husband jumped into the water, helped Beate out, then drew the boat ashore, next to mine.

I asked myself what was the best thing for me to do. I could emerge from behind my cliff, walk past them with dignity, betraying no embarrassment and perhaps even greeting them, then push my boat into the water

and leave. I could remain on the beach, have a swim, take the sun like any other bather. Or, finally—and this was the worst course but the one most in keeping with my previous behavior—I could keep hidden, not let myself be glimpsed, and see what happened. In other words, continue the pursuit and the ambush, as I had a bit earlier on the shortcut, or on the other days in the pensione. I said this course was the worst; I might add that, in some obscure way, I felt it was the only one that the Müllers, for reasons I didn't know, were expecting of me.

What did the two of them want of me, after all? To begin with, in all likelihood, their presence on the beach was not accidental. I had left Beate when her husband plunged down in our midst from the height of the diving board; I had immediately gone to the little beach, where the boat was awaiting me. Obviously, the Müllers had decided to follow me; there were not many boats out on the water; it hadn't been hard for them to spot me, follow me at a distance. I spoke of pursuit, on my part; but now it seemed that the roles had been reversed: I was the pursued and they the pursuers. But the motive for all this escaped me. I, at least, had my feelings for Beate as justification. But what about the husband?

As I continued these reflections, I kept the couple in sight. They were still by the boat; she was looking around, perhaps looking for me but unable to find me, because the cliff now hid me completely; her husband, for his part, was unloading from the boat everything required for a well-organized picnic: a couple of deck chairs, some towels, a beach umbrella, a big Capri basket which apparently contained provisions, books, newspapers. Last of all, I saw him carefully carrying the box camera which, earlier, on the short cut, he had worn over his shoulder. So it was clear: the Müllers planned

to spend the entire afternoon on the beach. They would swim, sun-bathe, eat their lunch, talk, read, sleep; and what else? Ah, of course, they would take photographs. For some reason, I immediately thought that, of all these occupations, photography was the most important.

The husband briskly, Beate more calmly, carried the picnic things to a spot higher up on the beach, at an equal distance from the shore and the cliffs in the background. I wondered if the Müllers could see me as I could see them, but I could reach no conclusion: perhaps they saw me, perhaps not; surely Beate had seen me when the boat was approaching the shore, and just as surely she had informed her husband of my presence. Now they knew that, from some point, I was observing them; at the same time, they seemed to behave with the perfect freedom of people who have no suspicion of being observed. So I was to watch them with the serenity of someone convinced he is invisible; and they were to display themselves with the innocence of those unaware of being watched.

But what was to be the nature of the display that the Müllers were preparing with such pains? Seated in the brief shadow of the cliff that served me as screen, I looked for a long time at the couple, unable to understand what was really happening. Everything took place slowly and calmly; at the same time, slowness and calm seemed, in some obscure way, premeditated, planned. First the husband unfolded the deck chairs; then he drove the umbrella into the ground among the stones and opened it; finally, he was spreading out the tablecloth on the beach. I thought they would start eating; I was mistaken. The husband sat down again on his chair and began to fiddle with the camera. Beate, too, now, was stretched out in her deck chair and was looking straight

at me; or, at least, so it seemed; she had put on her black glasses once more, and the direction of her gaze could be guessed only by the position of her head.

All this proceeded for a long time. The sun seemed arrested in the sky directed over my head; I felt enfolded in an unbearable blaze. The cliff's shade protected me very inadequately; I had to huddle with my arms clasping my knees; I couldn't stretch my legs except into the sun. Moreover, my boat, drawn ashore next to the Müllers', didn't allow them to ignore my presence and suggested an extreme hypothesis: they knew very well I was there, but, as in the café last night, they had decided to act as if I weren't there. This supposition was the most painful, because it implied Beate's total complicity with her husband, against me. I would have preferred some other plan that comprehended my presence and gradually but definitively involved me more and more.

Then, all of a sudden, this immobile and ambiguous scene shifted, was altered. The husband threw down his newspaper, picked up the camera again, held it to his eyes, aiming the lens at the bay. He peered into it at length, then raised his eyes from the lens, turned to Beate, and spoke to her. She answered, turning toward him, calm and pensive. The conversation went on for a little while longer, intimate, sullen, and deliberately subdued; behind my cliff, for some reason or other, I had the humiliating sensation that the two were talking about me. Then, at a gesture of her husband's, an invitation, Beate rose from the chair and, walking barefoot on the burning pebbles, went and sat on Müller's lap. I was not expecting this conjugal intimacy and I widened my eyes, almost incredulous. Her husband put his arm around Beate's slender hips; he spread the five thick fingers of his protective hand over the thin buttock. Meanwhile,

with the other hand, he groped her neck, rumpled her curls, stroked her throat. For a little while, Beate let him have his way; then, suddenly, she wheeled around and began covering his face with little kisses, thick and fast, from chin to forehead. She kissed like a bird pecking: with intensity and precision. Finally Müller stretched out his arm, picked up the camera he had set down on the stones; Beate rose and walked toward the shore. Her husband finished adjusting the lens of the camera, then stood up and followed her.

I watched with redoubled attention: I sensed that now the thing the couple had so far been engaged in preparing would happen. Beate was walking carefully, setting one bare foot after the other on the searing stones; her cautious movement made her slim and lanky body jerk this way and that, like a disjointed marionette. Now the pelvis, already an adult woman's in its broadness but still adolescent in its thinness, shifted awkwardly with one hip up and one down; now her shoulders, square and bony, as one foot made a misstep, suddenly tilted to one side, as if pulled down by the weight of her carelessly bound, disheveled hair. The frail arms, the slim neck, the scrawny thighs increased this impression of a woman-puppet lost in the great light of the summer heat. Reaching the shore, Beate promptly stuck her scorched feet into the water. Then she turned toward her husband, as if awaiting orders.

Müller trained the camera on her; Beate said something in an interrogative tone; her husband, peering into the lens, answered after a delay with a few words in German, which this time I heard: "Of course, obviously." What was it that, as they say, was "understood by itself"? I learned at once because I saw Beate, without hesitation, slip off her bathing suit.

It was black, one-piece, loose for her immature body. Even from a distance, I could see it was big for her, especially around the thighs, across the belly and bosom: in the places, that is, where another, more shapely woman would have filled and stretched it. I saw her raise her hands to the shoulder straps and lower them over her arms. The husband said something else to her, then Beate pushed her suit down, to her waist; in the blue air her little breasts, like a nanny goat's, firm and pear-shaped, jutted out. But for Müller this wasn't enough; he made an imperious gesture with his hand, his eye still glued to the lens, as if to order her to lower the bathing suit still further. Beate obeyed, took the suit with both hands, and carefully drew it down to her feet. Now completely naked, standing erect, she waited. Her husband looked into the lens, shouted impatiently: "Step back! Farther!" This time Beate turned away from us and, on tiptoe, entered the sea. She advanced slowly, almost unsteadily; I saw the water rise gradually around her, up, up along the thin and slender back, from legs to hips, and then to the neck; she remained a moment motionless with her head and a bit of her shoulders out of the water; then she turned, reversed direction, and began advancing toward the shore. From the water her shoulders gradually emerged, her waist, her belly. Müller, meanwhile, like a madman, was darting here and there over the stones, furiously snapping his photographs. Beate took another two or three slow steps; slowly her pubes, red with thick hair, emerged. Her husband let out a kind of desperate cry; he commanded: "Like this! Like this!" at the same time demonstrating, putting his hand first over his groin, then to his head, and finally to his chest, like a woman who, out of modesty, undoes her hair and covers her bosom and abdomen with it. Then I had a

sudden enlightenment. Müller, with those gestures, was following a model, a familiar figure. Which? All at once I understood: no doubt an admirer of classical Italian painting, Müller wanted to photograph his wife in the pose of Botticelli's Venus who, clad only in her hair, emerges from the sea.

I wasn't mistaken. Obediently, Beate raised her hands to her head, undid the already half-loosened knot, scattered her hair over her body as best she could; then she put her right hand over her pubes and her left to her bosom. Now she was immobile, erect, as if waiting for further instructions from her husband. Satisfied at last, Müller went on photographing her, more calmly and from every side. Finally he must have used up the roll of film, because I saw him suddenly stop photographing and examine the camera. Then he went to his deck chair, took a new roll from the pocket of the jacket hanging there, and inserted it in the place of the used roll. All these were rather lengthy tasks which he performed without haste, in an ostentatiously professional manner. Meanwhile, Beate was waiting on the shore, straight and motionless in the Botticellian pose. Finally, without impatience, but in a fairly loud voice, as if to allow me to hear, she asked her husband: "Are you satisfied, or do you want me to do something else?"

Müller looked into the lens and then, also raising his voice, he answered: "Ask the gentleman over there behind the rock if he's satisfied; don't ask me."

So, once again, it was the familiar "lesson"; this time, in agreement with his wife, Müller was calling me a voyeur. But this first hypothesis, for all its likelihood, had no sooner entered my mind that it was driven out by a subtler reflection: in reality, Müller, in love with his wife and proud of her beauty, wanted me to admire

her, too, posed as Venus, completely naked. Of course, the "lesson" was the motive he gave himself for this sort of conjugal exhibitionism; but this only added an extra complication to his impotent passion.

These reflections were so rapid that they overlapped, so to speak, the gestures and words of the husband. Suddenly, as if swept away by rage, without waiting for Beate to answer him, Müller went on: "But why ask such an obvious question? Naturally the gentleman isn't satisfied; he wants to photograph you himself. Of course. Why not?" With broad strides, brandishing the camera, he came toward me.

In the few moments it took him to reach me, I weighed the pro and con of what I could and should do: I could take the camera from his hand and fling it down on the stones; I could accept the role he had assigned me in this sort of play, and photograph Beate; I could, finally, refuse without violence the part he wanted to give me and leave. I don't know why, as if instinctively, at the end of this reflection, I looked at Beate. Then I saw her eyes flash me the same assent with which, in the dining room, she had advised me to respond to Müller's Fascist salute. I turned my eyes away from her, I looked her husband in the face for a moment; then I came out from behind the rock and, without a word, took the camera he held out to me. Immediately, Müller hopped back and ran toward his wife. I saw him enter the water, seize Beate's waist. He shouted in a breathless, furious voice: "Would you be so kind and take my picture with my wife?"

An angry idea came to me: in my turn, I would react to the "lesson" with another "lesson." That is, I would photograph Beate's sex, only her sex. And so Müller, when he developed the picture, wouldn't find himself or

Beate but only the anonymous, impersonal, and obviously symbolical triangle of red hair.

With this thought, or rather, with this anger in mind, I slowly lowered the lens, from Beate's face down along her body to her abdomen. Now she was no longer posing as the Botticelli Venus; forced by her husband's arm, she was pressed against his heavy body, in an almost pathetic manner, no longer covering her groin and bosom with her hands. I focused on the pubes; the lens was filled with tawny hair, so clear and close that I seemed to catch in my nostrils the faint sweaty odor that undoubtedly emanated from it. I held my finger on the button; but then I had the strange sensation as if, from behind, a man pressed my elbow and made me raise the lens. There again was the belly, the waist, the bosom, the neck. The mysterious hand, as I framed Beate's face, suddenly vanished, as if to tell me I could now snap the picture. I looked again: Beate's face was isolated in the frame, without Müller's presence; in her eyes, as if to confirm the spiritual quality of our love, there was her usual expression of anguish. I thought: When Müller develops this photograph, he'll see her face and nothing else. Its expression will show him Beate was taking no part in this unworthy game and her heart was with me.

I pressed the button. Carefully, telling myself that it contained the precious image of Beate's gaze, I set the camera down on the pebbles. Then, my head bowed, I slowly crossed the beach to my boat. A few minutes later I was already out of the bay.

VI

I ate at the restaurant near the cabins; for a little while I lingered in the sun, on a deck chair; then I climbed back to the square and caught the bus going up to Capri. The fact that I ate at the Piccola Marina instead of at the pensione, where I usually ate, can be explained not so much by any hope of seeing again the Müllers, who, as I was aware, had decided to have a picnic on the bay, as by the reluctance to find myself alone at table, facing their empty place. But I must admit I was somehow disappointed on seeing no sign of the couple's reappearing even after the time by which they had presumably eaten their lunch on the shore. So, without setting any deadline, they had decided to enjoy fully their last Capri day, as it was logical to expect of a northern couple starved

for sun and sea. They must have spent a long, long conjugal afternoon, contemplation alternating with love-making, calm with violence, silence with words. Perhaps the husband had reproached Beate for her mysterious and stubborn flirtatiousness; perhaps she, to reassure him, had resigned herself to making love with the man who horrified her because his hands were stained with blood. But what sort of love? The episode in the bay, when Beate was photographed in the pose of Botticelli's Venus, made me imagine obscure, erotic demands, complicated, furthermore, by the myths of the subculture. I experienced no jealousy, thinking these things; perhaps only a feeling of pity that made me see Beate as a victim and her husband as an executioner. All the same, I consoled myself with the thought of how, that night, Beate would come to me in my room; beyond this certitude, I could not and, basically, did not want to go.

But once I had reached the Capri square I felt again the repugnance of being alone in the pensione; I decided to delay my journey back up to Anacapri. It was three o'clock; the bus left every half hour. I decided to take a walk and catch the bus immediately afterwards. And so there I was, on the little Tragara road that winds around the island, halfway up the mountainside, all the way to the Natural Arch. I didn't mean to cover the whole distance; I thought to go as far as the belvedere over the Faraglioni; then I would slowly retrace my steps. Thus, I told myself, I would kill the afternoon I was forced to spend alone, linking in my mind the moment when I had seen Beate last, in the bay, with the moment when I would see her again in the pensione dining room at the dinner hour.

The Tragara walk, on one side, has an uninterrupted series of old, thickly grown gardens climbing up the

slope; on the other, the sea. I set off on the silent brick path, in the harsh and overblown sweetness of the summer afternoon, looking at the blue sea down below at the bottom of the mountain through the red trunks of the pines, and then at the gates covered with the dusty climbing plants of the gardens. Then, in this solitude, calm and relaxing, but somehow predisposed, almost like the garden of a hospital or a sanatorium, I was naturally led to think back over the day's events. First of all, I wondered, why was the husband acting in that virtually incredible manner, at once complaisant and rebelling? Obviously, as I told myself, this behavior of his stemmed from the kind of relations he had with his wife; of these relations I knew nothing, however, except that Müller "horrified" Beate because "his hands were stained with blood." But, in that case, how to reconcile this horror with the insistent, impassioned kisses with which, at the bay, Beate had covered her husband's fat, sweating face? And with the docile willingness she had shown, letting herself be photographed naked, in front of me, posed as the Botticelli Venus? Obviously it was impossible to conceive of any harmony, unless . . . I recalled, at this point, the imaginings that had kept me bad, tormenting company while I was eating all alone on the terrace at the Piccola Marina. They were violent imaginings of the "real," that is to say, the erotic relationship between Müller and his wife. But now these imaginings no longer made me think with pity of Beate as a victim and with hatred of Müller as an executioner. Or rather, yes, they were still victim and executioner, but not truly distinct and opposed but bound one to the other by a tie of secret, reciprocal corruption, as often happens between the oppressor and the oppressed. Müller, certainly, employing God knows what kind of blackmail, forced Beate to

play the part of the submissive wife; but Beate, for her part, submitted to Müller's will with an enthusiasm that came close to complicity. This and only this could explain the spontaneous and apparently unsolicited kisses, as well as the display of nudity that morning at the bay. In other words, Beate, on the one hand, tried desperately, with her looks, to tell me that she loved me and loved only me; but, on the other hand, she not only failed to rebel against Müller's probable blackmail but transformed it, even if unconsciously and despite herself, into an erotic bond from which she seemed to derive a secret and unconfessable pleasure of her own.

Then, reconstructing in my imagination, starting from the little I had seen that morning at the bay, the much that I had not seen but felt I could fairly suppose, I made the overwhelming discovery that I not only felt no jealousy but was actually excited, aroused by the cruel and profanatory images of the victim-executioner relationship. Yes, I was in love with Beate, but what now seemed to attract me most in her was precisely what, on the contrary, I should hope had never existed: her perverse complicity with the man who horrified her and whose hands were stained with blood. Worse still: excitement and arousal made me "understand" Müller and, through that understanding, linked me, made me almost in league with him. In reality, at this moment, I resembled Müller more than I resembled myself. And, in fact, thinking of Beate's imminent visit that night, I saw myself assume the husband's place, changing nothing, just like a new master, who means to repeat, with the obedient slave, the same tortures of the old one.

At this point I raised my eyes and I realized I had reached the large clearing from which there is a broad view over the Faraglioni. A few people were leaning on

the railing, intently looking down; I approached and also looked. By now the sun had gone; the enormous, erect rocks, with the perfect visibility, no longer blurred by the noonday haze and not yet by those of the evening, suggested, in that proper light, two red aerolites set on a glassy, luminous blue surface. But the silent abyss into which they sank to me seemed all at once funereally sinister, precisely because it was tempting. I lowered my eyes, I saw I had looked down from a point where the belvedere extended over the void. Then I remembered what Signor Galamini had told me about the Migliara area, another sheer drop, and about the girl who had thrown herself down with her braid tied over her eyes. A similar temptation seemed now to waft toward me, coming up, up from the depths of the Faraglioni, so that I drew back from the railing, almost in fear. But it wasn't the suicidal temptation of one who loves too much and in vain, like the Migliara girl, but rather that of one who, on the contrary, fears being incapable of love.

I resumed walking in the opposite direction, heading toward the square of Capri. Now, the idea of the corruption the Müllers shared, he as master, she as slave, a corruption in which I had had a presentiment, to my horror, that I might also be involved, inspired the opposing idea: I should respect Beate, not take advantage, that is, of her despair; in a word, unfortunately abused and threadbare, I should "save" her.

Naturally, I realized that you can't save anyone except, perhaps, by example; but I harbored the illusion that I could do it because I was convinced I could interpret despair in a different way from Beate. This meant that I would not give up Beate for fear of resembling her husband but in order to show myself as the man who felt capable of turning despair into a motive not for

death but for life. Thus, basically, saving Beate meant explaining to her my idea of "stabilized" despair, convincing her to forget Kleist, tearing her away from her husband and from the corrupt situation that was the origin of the double-suicide plan.

These reflections, the consequent decisions, the reflections on those decisions occupied my mind until my return to the Pensione Damecuta. I entered the hall, asked Signor Galamini for my key. He gave it to me along with an envelope that seemed to contain a book. On the envelope, in printed letters, there was written only my name: Lucio. I opened the envelope, took out the book: it was the volume of the letters of Heinrich von Kleist, already familiar to me since I had seen it that same morning on the cliff at Le Sirene. I went and sat in an armchair at the end of the hall; I examined the book. At first glance, I saw that the bookmark indicated a specific page. I turned to it, and I read:

To Ernest Friedrich Peguilhen

[Stimmings Inn, near Potsdam,
21 November 1811]

My very dear friend,

The loyal friendship you have always shown me till now awaits a wonderful test, for the two of us, namely Kleist, whom you know, and I, find ourselves here at Stimmung, on the Potsdam road, in a very awkward state, for we are lying here *shot* and must now look to the kindness of a sympathetic friend to commit our mortal husk to the safekeeping of the earth . . .

Reaching this point, I didn't continue, both because I knew this famous letter well, and because the meaning

of the message entrusted to Henriette Vogel's final missive was by now clear to me. It was, for that matter, the same meaning I had attributed to the Kleist book immediately after meeting Beate in the water. But it is one thing to formulate a supposition and another to see it confirmed by events. With the book, Beate had aroused my suspicions; with Henrietta's letter she was openly proposing that I should kill myself with her in a few hours' time. At this thought a shudder ran down my back; my eyes glazed over; my breath failed. Mechanically, I closed the book, got up from the chair, and started up the stairs. But when I set foot on the first step, I turned and went back to the desk and asked Signor Galamini if it was possible to have my dinner sent to my room. I didn't feel up to seeing Beate again at table; and, furthermore, I wanted to reflect calmly on the latest episode of this extraordinary day of mine. Signor Galamini assured me it was possible and jotted my request down in his notebook. I thanked him, adding, in my distress, the unnecessary explanation "You see, I don't feel very well."

Once in the room, I flung myself fully clothed on the bed, picked up the book again, reread the letter. I felt, in the precision of Beate's message, something abnormal, extraordinary, but beyond this obscure feeling I could proceed no further. Unable to reflect, I began leafing through the Kleist volume, reading at random first one letter, then another. I knew them well; but now, in the light of Beate's suicidal plan, they seemed to take on a new meaning that concerned me, or rather, Beate and me. Kleist had killed himself with Henriette Vogel; but for reasons different from the woman's. Kleist had done it in the grip of a total despair that involved every aspect of his life; Henriette, on the contrary, who had cancer of the uterus, easily identified herself with her lover, I

imagined because of the disease, to the point of accepting the double suicide. Now, between the two of us, Beate and me, which was Kleist in the suicide plan, and which was Henriette? On the one hand, there was the fact that I was the man and Beate the woman; so it was conceivable that I was Kleist and Beate, Henriette. On the other hand, however, there could be no doubt that the double-suicide plan had been formulated by Kleist, as the logical conclusion to his life of despair; in this case, the identification was reversed; Beate was Kleist, and I, Henriette. But I wasn't ill with cancer nor with some morbid obsession that cancer could symbolize. On the contrary, I was the man of "stabilized" despair, that is, the stoic man, at once rational and healthy, and so I couldn't be Henriette, apparently lucid, but, at heart, morbidly passionate, as she appeared in her final letter.

However, I was in love with Beate in the same naïve and romantic way that, at least to judge by the letters, Kleist was in love with Henriette. Consequently, it was also possible that the double-suicide plan had been formulated by Henriette, and that Kleist, despairing, but not really wanting to die, had agreed to it out of love for the woman, thus ceding to a kind of sentimental challenge or blackmail. In this case, I could again be identified with Kleist, to whom I was further linked by a passion for literature. But then, if I was Kleist and Beate was Henriette, who had Henriette really been? At this point I realized I knew nothing about Henriette except that she had cancer; as, for that matter, I knew nothing about Beate, except that she was the wife of Müller. Therefore . . .

Therefore, that night, "some time after midnight," Beate could enter my room. I realized immediately that, after reading Henriette's letter, this prospect gave me a

feeling of contradiction and anguish: on the one hand, I was impatient to see Beate, to speak to her, to begin the rescue operation that, a short time ago, had seemed to me the only kind of relation there could be between me and her. On the other hand, however, the message entrusted to the letter in which Kleist and Henriette announced their death made me think I had been completely mistaken about Beate and the sort of relationship there was between her and Müller. Beate, probably, was not a victim; Müller, certainly, was not an executioner. If anything, Henriette Vogel's letter, countersigned by Kleist, and used as a message by Beate, seemed to suggest a very special way of conceiving love. I couldn't, indeed, overlook the fact that the plan of death "together," apparently pure and heroic, concealed and translated into a transparent euphemism that of love "together." Or, if you prefer, of eroticism "together." Love and death: this old literary partnership that meant love inseparable from death and mingled with it, did not in the least diminish the seriousness of Beate's plan; it simply revealed its ambiguous basis. But I was attracted to Beate, I desired her. Thus, the same vital instinct that should have made me reject double suicide, that same instinct drove me, instead, through desire, to accept it.

Suddenly, seized by an irrepressible agitation, I sat straight up in bed and looked on the night table for my pack of cigarettes and matches. And there, on the white marble, I saw the *Also sprach Zarathustra* which I had used to send Beate my first love message, underlining a poem which she then underlined as well. To see the book and, however ridiculous it may sound in such a situation, to be tempted to strike my fist against my forehead, crying "Eureka," were simultaneous. In fact, I had discovered that Beate had succeeded in making a kind

of connection between Nietzsche's poem and Kleist's double suicide.

Didn't the poem say, after all, that pleasure wants eternity? And what eternity was more sure and more boundless than that of death? But Beate was not cultured; she was probably an ordinary, simple German girl married to a man by the name of Müller. Therefore, Beate didn't want to die because she had succeeded in creating a link between Nietzsche and Kleist; she had created a link between Nietzsche and Kleist because she wanted to die.

So I found myself up against someone who meant to do seriously in real life what I wanted to have a character do in my novel: namely, what I didn't want to do in real life myself. The result of all this was that I found myself facing an obscurely meaningful dilemma: on the one hand, there was life, with the plan of double suicide modeled on the suicide of Kleist and arbitrarily wed to the verses of Nietzsche, forcing culture's hand; on the other, there was culture that, with the opposite plan of "stabilized" despair, was blocking the path of life.

What then was to be done? Mentally, I listed the things I could do that night:

1. Lock the door, not open for any reason, and leave Capri the next day
2. Arrive as far as the delightful and fatal moment: namely, as far as the sleeping pills, the poison, the pistol. Arrive at pleasure, but not as far as eternity
3. Kill ourselves together

VII

Suddenly, in the midst of these reflections, I heard two voices, speaking beneath the window. For some unknown reason, I promptly thought those two voices concerned me; that is, they were somehow providing an answer to my question: "What to do?" I sprang down from the bed, went to the shutter, raised it slightly, and looked down.

As I said earlier, the two windows of my room were over the garden of the pensione, directly above the old marquee of white painted iron that protected the front door. The room was on the third floor, so that I could easily see without being seen. At that still-lazy and silent moment of the late afternoon, only two people were sitting at one of the groups of wicker tables and

chairs scattered over the gravel: the head waiter of the pensione, and a woman whom I immediately recognized as Sonia, the curator of the Shapiro Collection.

A thin beanpole of a man with grizzled, disheveled hair, electric eyes buried below thick eyebrows, a ram's hooked nose, the headwaiter was sprawled nonchalantly beside the table, half reclining in his chair; and he listened smugly to Sonia, who was speaking violently, bent forward. I was struck at once by the fact that, the first time I had seen Sonia, she had been dealing with a driver, now with a waiter; as if her relations with two persons of servile condition indicated some loss of social status.

I pricked up my ears. Then I realized that the voices, so clear and distinct, that had brought me running to the window, had belonged to a now-concluded phase of the dialogue. Until the moment when I looked out, Sonia and the headwaiter, in all likelihood, had confined their talk to insignificant things which, for this reason, could be harmlessly overheard by anyone. But now the dialogue seemed to have become more intimate and, at once, more pressing; and Sonia had lowered her voice until it was a kind of hissing, urgent murmur. Surely she was addressing to the headwaiter some reproaches whose nature, for that matter, was revealed by the man's attitude, an obvious mixture of male vanity and worldly self-confidence. In other words, Sonia, to all appearances, was reproaching an unfaithful or negligent lover who, moreover, seemed to consider her with the same indulgent and amused contempt I had sensed in the carriage driver's attitude the day of my arrival at Anacapri.

The two went on for a while, she insisting in her sibilant murmur: he answering her now and then with some brief, indolent words, as of weak and unconvinced

denial. She was hunched forward, pointing an accusing finger at the man's chest; he drew back and confined himself to shaking his head negatively. At the same time, he didn't alter his indifferent attitude; he was smoking, raising every so often to his lips, with a pair of long skeletal fingers, the stump of a cigarette by now almost burnt to the end. Then Sonia fell silent, though maintaining her accusatory position, as if to catch her breath; the headwaiter exploited the moment to throw his butt on the ground, crush it with his foot, and utter a brief, inaudible remark which had an immediate and entirely unexpected effect.

Sonia answered something, unaggressively this time and without hisses of anger. The headwaiter lighted another cigarette, then he also spoke, in a bantering tone, superior and benevolent. Then Sonia bent forward, seized the long hand, dark and very thin, that was dangling over the arm of the chair, and kissed it furiously. The headwaiter was holding the lighted cigarette between the fingers of the other hand; as Sonia went on kissing his free hand, he put the cigarette to his lips and took a long drag; meanwhile, as if incidentally, he observed the woman's bowed head.

Then something happened that represented the unforeseen but logical conclusion of the episode. Not letting go of the headwaiter's hand, indeed kissing it more than ever, Sonia stretched her hand back to the large canvas bag hanging over the arm of her chair, rummaged in it for a moment, pulled out a white envelope folded over twice, obviously prepared in advance, and made to slip it, from below, into the very hand she was covering with kisses.

For some reason or other, at that very moment, I couldn't help coughing. The headwaiter raised his eyes,

saw me, withdrew his hand. Sonia remained bent over for a moment, said something in a pleading tone, and extended her hand on the table. Closed in the palm, the twice-folded envelope could still be seen. There was a moment of silence and immobility. The headwaiter looked at Sonia's outstretched arm, at the hand grasping the envelope, but he said nothing, he didn't move. I thought his contemplative immobility had a natural, animal quality, somehow confirmed by the silent sun of the summer afternoon. In that same way, I said to myself, geckos remained motionless, those small and pretty reptiles that, at Anacapri, can be seen on the walls or the roofs of the terraces, intent on observing the movements of a fly or some other insect. I waited a long time; Sonia held out the envelope, with a heartrending insistence; the headwaiter pretended to smoke, avoided looking at her, seemed to reflect. In reality, I thought, he was the gecko, and the envelope, the fly. Then there was a sound of carriage wheels on the gravel of the drive. I raised my eyes; I saw that, indeed, a carriage was appearing in the square and I had time to make this reflection: how is it that this carriage can arrive at the entrance of the pensione whereas on my arrival the driver stopped in the square and carried my suitcase down on his shoulder? I supplied myself with this answer: the driver wanted to earn a few extra pennies, acting also as porter.

All this lasted an instant, but the headwaiter exploited this instant of distraction on my part in order to grasp the envelope Sonia was holding out to him, with the same lightning rapidity of the gecko who, after hours of immobility, catches the long-observed fly with his tongue and swallows it. Now Sonia and the headwaiter were on their feet, by the table; I was just in time to see the man's long, bony fingers slip the envelope in his coat

pocket and then lean forward to shake Sonia's hand. At this point I withdrew from the window.

I really don't know what came over me. I reflected that there were still six hours (but there could be more; Beate had said I was to expect her at any time after midnight) and these six hours appeared completely empty to me except for one possibility: if I were to fill them with the thought, unbearable as it was fascinating, of double suicide. I came to the decision that, to avoid the torment both of that emptiness and of that fullness, I would have recourse to Sonia. She was the only person I knew at Anacapri; and further, as I said before, I felt her presence in the garden at that hour, in some way still mysterious for me, concerned me directly. I would go down into the garden, I would make myself known, I would ask her permission to visit the Shapiro Collection. Perhaps, later, if the six hours had not gone by, I would invite her to supper. Finally, toward midnight, I would return to the pensione to wait for Beate's visit.

No sooner said than done. I ran out of the room, dashed down the steps to the hall, went into the garden. On the gravel the groups of chairs and tables were deserted. I went to the driveway, almost running: no one in sight. Then I actually began to run. There was the gate, wide open; there was the narrow street among the houses; there was the sloping square, with the dirt steps and its lone olive tree in the center, the trunk twisted and the few branches bare. Sonia was over there, almost at the exit of the square. I started running up the broad steps, I called: "Sonia." Immediately she stopped; but, oddly, as if thunderstruck by her own name, she didn't turn round.

Thus, the mirage of the first time was repeated. She had her back to me: the dark, curly hair of a youthful

thickness and spring, scattered like a broad mane over her shoulders, again gave me the illusion of having called by the name of Sonia a beautiful young woman who, in a moment, would turn, showing me a perfect, radiant face. Further: for a moment, I was not so much deluded as strangely certain that Sonia really was a young and beautiful woman with whom I would be able to forget Beate and her funereal and alluring proposal.

Still running, I called again: "Sonia." This time she turned and I saw once more, in the shadow of the beautiful youthful hair, the old Mongol face. Strangely, I felt the inner shock a strong disappointment produces, as if I were seeing Sonia for the first time and hadn't known that she was a more than mature woman. That's it, all right, I couldn't help thinking, with some cruelty as I approached her: a more than mature woman, and at everyone's beck and call: the driver who had almost run her down, the headwaiter to whom, for obvious reasons, she secretly slips money; and finally me, who call her, hardly knowing her and whom, nevertheless, she docilely waits for now, up at the entrance to the square.

I reached her, breathless, and said: "I was in the carriage that almost ran you down the other day just outside Anacapri. My name's Lucio. Do you remember me?"

She gave me a kindly look from beneath the old, sunbaked eyelids. Then she answered, in a nasal Russian accent in curious contrast with her Caprese pronunciation: "Of course I remember you and I also remember that animal Salvatore who nearly killed me. But who are you? What do you want?"

I said hastily: "I've been told that you . . ."

She interrupted me with similar haste: "Call me *tu*."

"That you"—I used the *tu*—"are the curator of the Shapiro Collection. I'd like you to show it to me."

"The Collection is closed. It reopens in September."

I insisted, anxiously: "Couldn't you let me see it anyway? I'm interested in painting, actually."

She listened to me with a cynical but encouraging expression, as if to say: Keep talking, it's all lies, but who cares? The other day a driver, today a headwaiter, and now the first stranger: I'm old and alone and grateful to anyone who notices my existence. Then she said, shamelessly: "All right, I'll accept the pretext of the Collection. But what do you really want with me?"

"Really, nothing. Except to see the Collection."

"Interested in painting, eh?"

"Very much."

She went on studying me with an amused smile. Then she said: "You're outrageous, you can't even make up a good lie. But you must know what you want. Anyway, if you're not too bored with an old woman's company, you can walk me back to the house. Then you can visit it by yourself, if it's true that you want to see it."

Thus she unquestionably attributed to me amorous intentions I myself hadn't yet formulated, treating me with the almost maternal indulgence, the characteristic coyness of a mature woman toward a man much younger than herself. I accepted, provisionally, the role imposed on me and asked innocently: "What kind of painting does the Collection have?"

"Expressionists. German, Austrian, Belgian, Swedish, and so on."

As she spoke, she stared at me with curious insistence. I looked back at her. Then I was struck by the bloodred of her lips, at once thin and protruding like the lips of certain monkeys. The red was even too youthful, contradicting the maturity of the round face, wrinkled and puffy, dusted a floury white with some cheap powder. Looking at those lips, like a wound, I realized I wanted

to see again what I had seen during the quarrel with the driver: her sticking her scarlet tongue, moist and thick, out of that kind of gray, withered mask. Why did I want this and why did this desire arouse me? Perhaps because it was the only thing about her that had struck me and that justified my first intuition that our meeting was not random. But how can you tell an old lady that you want her to stick out her tongue? On what pretext?

Meanwhile, we had started walking along, side by side. I asked her if she was really Russian. She laughed bitterly: "Totally Russian. Born in the province of Saratov, but taken while still a child to St. Petersburg. Sorry, I mean Leningrad."

"You're an exile."

"Yes, that's right. An exile."

"Nobility?"

"Of course!"

"Then you're a white Russian."

"White: hardly! I'm a redder-than-red Russian, you might say, since the Bolsheviks call themselves red. I'm ultra-red."

"Ultra-Russian and ultra-red."

"You've got it. I belonged to what was called the Socialist Revolutionary Party and I wanted to bring about what is generally termed the revolution. But what do you know about all this? You're a handsome Italian boy who's come to Capri to swim and to seduce the girls on the beach. What's all of this to you?"

Somewhat bored, I hastened to explain to her that I wasn't only "a handsome Italian boy," but also an intellectual: with a German doctorate and a thesis on Kleist, I was at present translating a short story of his, I contributed to literary magazines, wrote articles on German literature (actually they were short, informatory pieces,

nothing important), the author of an essay on the relationship between Nietzsche and D'Annunzio (this, actually, I hadn't yet written; it was a long-standing project I planned to carry out after I finished the novel).

I promptly realized that the names Kleist, Nietzsche, D'Annunzio made no impression whatsoever on her; she seemed to be hearing them for the first time. In fact, she answered: "When I was young, I read some German novels—Goethe, Schiller, et cetera. I didn't understand a word of them, so I gave it all up. I read some Russian novels, too: Tolstoy, for example, but now I don't pick and choose. I read whatever comes to hand, just to kill time."

"But if you were a revolutionary, you must have read books on politics."

"Oh, yes, I read those. The party's underground newspapers, pamphlets, manifestos. But don't ask me the names of the authors. It was too long ago! I've forgotten them."

I noticed she was holding an old book, all dog-eared. I grasped her wrist and turned it slightly to read the title: *The English Housekeeper.* I asked: "Is this novel good?"

"Not bad."

"It looks like a novel for young ladies, a romance."

"Well, I'm a young lady, no?"

As she flirted like this, she obliged me again to assume the role of the so-called handsome Italian boy. I stopped for a moment to light a cigarette, but discovered I had left the pack at the pensione. I asked: "Where's the tobacconist?"

"There. Right in front of you."

I looked; in fact, the tobacconist's was just there, before us. I hadn't seen it because it was so close. The sign, with the words "Salt and Tobacco" and the government

seal, was faded and peeling; the dusty little shopwindow contained a few ancient items of stationery; on the sidewalk there was one of those racks that display color postal cards. Suddenly I had an idea; I said: "Let's go in and buy some cigarettes."

We entered the dark little room that stank of tobacco, ink, and paper. The tobacconist, a buxom woman with the hint of a mustache at the corners of her mouth and a pyramid of black hair on top of her head, spread out four packs of cigarettes on the counter so that I could choose the one I preferred. I was slightly amazed by this deference, reserved as a rule for steady customers. Then, seeing Sonia address the woman familiarly and call her by name, "Mariannina," I realized I owed this respect to her. I chose a pack, then picked out a postcard. It showed a low building, of red stucco, the windows framed in white marble; below it, in italic print: *Villa Shapiro.* I showed it to Sonia: "This is the villa?"

"That's right."

"May I offer you a pack of cigarettes?"

"What a question! Mariannina, my favorites, please. Giubeks. But nice and soft, eh?"

Mariannina flung another four packs on the counter; Sonia chose the softest, testing the cigarettes with her long, dark fingers. I wrote a greeting on the postcard and the address of my parents; I asked the tobacconist for a stamp; she gave it to me. I put stamp and postcard on the counter, in front of Sonia, and said: "Write just Sonia. My parents will think I'm having an affair."

What I had calculated was this: Sonia, after signing the card, would see at hand a stamp that had to be stuck on it, and to do me a favor, she would moisten it with saliva and thus would have to stick out her monstrously youthful tongue, as I desired. I pretended to concen-

trate on writing a second card, while I watched Sonia out of the corner of my eye. From the counter she took the pen placed there for customers, dipped it into the ink bottle, wrote her signature; then, without hesitation, she pressed the stamp on the little sponge, also on the counter, almost, I thought, as if with the deliberate aim of foiling my plan. But, to my relief, the sponge proved completely dry. Sonia cried: "Mariannina, this sponge isn't wet, not a bit," then she turned toward me and asked, with an odd hesitation: "Will you lick the stamp or do you want me to lick it?"

"You lick it."

She gave me a sidelong glance of complicity; then she stuck out her tongue and ran it over the stamp, I gave her a hard look, with the attention of someone seeking confirmation of a personal impression; and I immediately realized that the impression was repeated, identical: yes, Sonia's tongue had a vitality of its own, swollen and violent; yes, her face on the outside was like a piece of withered fruit, but inside still rich with juice. Sonia pressed her thumb on the stamp, then exclaimed: "Ugh! The glue left a bad taste in my mouth."

I suggested, as we came out of the shop: "Shall we have a coffee, to get rid of that bad taste?"

"Why not?"

From the tobacconist's a few steps brought us to the café. We went in, stood at the counter. Sonia said to the barman, with her usual village familiarity: "Now, Domenico, make it good and strong!" Then, a moment later: "Family all well?"

The barman replied that the family was all well; Sonia, for her part, lighted a cigarette, with visible pleasure. I picked up the novel, which Sonia had set down on the counter, I opened it. Sonia said to me, expelling smoke

through her nostrils: "It's the story of a housekeeper who, in the end, marries the very rich widower whose children she is in charge of. A very interesting novel."

I couldn't tell if she was speaking seriously; I had formed a different concept of revolutionaries. Sonia perhaps noticed my puzzlement and added: "This story interests me for personal reasons, too; I was a governess for twenty-five years of my life."

"Where?"

"All over. Good bourgeois European families move a lot. Paris, the Riviera, Switzerland, Italy, Germany. Then, London, where I met Shapiro."

"Who asked you to look after his Collection?"

"Who asked me to be his housekeeper. Later he promoted me to director of the Collection. But there's nothing to direct. Shapiro hasn't bought any new pictures for a long time. The Collection needs a watchman, not a director."

"What does your work consist of?"

"I have to read some dreadfully boring English novels aloud, in the evening, to put him to sleep. And maybe keep him company when he takes a little walk sometimes."

"Almost nothing."

"That's right, almost nothing. Especially since he spends only the summer months in Anacapri. In the winter he moves to the Riviera."

"And you go with him?"

"No, I stay in Anacapri."

We left the bar after Sonia casually murmured, "Ciao, Domenico." Then we started to walk along the narrow path, in the playful shade of the plane trees, along the flowering oleanders with their harsh, dusty scent. The plane trees' boughs met over our heads; through the

leaves the sun occasionally winked, indirect, filtered, and though it was still the glowing sun of June, it had a dreamy, remote quality, as if it were the sun of a June of many years ago. The rusty gates of the late-nineteenth-century villas and, beyond them, at the end of the dense, overgrown gardens, the Pompeian or art nouveau façades enhanced this impression of summer anachronism. I looked at Sonia: probably she was the same age as those villas and those gardens: it was the year 1934, she looked fifty or thereabouts, she must have been born in 1885 or earlier. She had been born in a sprawling, muddy city of tsarist Russia while here, at Anacapri, some rich Neapolitan or Englishman was having a villa built where he could spend the winter months. Sea bathing hadn't yet become the fashion in those days; Anacapri was frequently chiefly in winter. I thought that, to complete this air of a daydream in which Anacapri seemed immersed, there should be the sound of a piano, slow and as if stammering under the hesitant fingers of a little girl, forced to practice in an old drawing room filled with yellowed photographs and beaded lampshades.

In fact, as if brought into being by this reflection, there was the piano, whose sounds seemed to come from one of those many gardens that flanked the road. But it wasn't a little girl's hesitant hands that produced those notes evocative of other, distant summers, but rather those of an adult who was playing with sound technique and for his or her own private pleasure. And in fact the hands were not playing exercises but, it seemed to me, Chopin, pausing now and then as if to recall something, and then resuming with agility and passion. I approached the gate and peered into the garden. I could see the usual drive, between pittosporum plants; and at the end stood the usual two-story villa, in art

nouveau style, decorated below the roof by a frieze of majolica tiles with a colored motif of purple iris and green leaves. The shutters were all closed except those of one window on the ground floor, the one from which the sounds seemed to be coming. I said: "I don't know why, but I'd like to meet the person playing the piano in that villa."

Sonia burst out laughing. "The easiest thing in the world. It's the mother of Dr. Cuomo, the lady doctor; this is her daily attack."

"What does her attack have to do with the piano?"

"Dottoressa Cuomo keeps her mother at home even though the old lady is subject to genuine fits; but she's not dangerous. When she has one of her spells, she sits down at the piano. But she never plays the piece all the way through. She proceeds for a bit, then begins over again, then stops, then starts once more."

True enough: always with the same passion, even before the Chopin piece ended, it was taken up again from the beginning. It was as if the poor woman were trying to fit into the very fine needle of her memory the almost invisible thread of a recollection. But the thread missed the eye, and then she would begin again. I asked: "What sort of woman is she, this mother of Dottoressa Cuomo?"

"When she's normal, a very nice old lady."

Curiously, this information, instead of dispelling the mystery of that house and that music, increased it. It was, basically, a mystery that no longer concerned the mother of Dottoressa Cuomo: it concerned me. It seemed to me that, if I lived in that villa with a slightly mad lady and her daughter, I would move out of my own time, I would find myself in a different time where hope and despair were words without meaning. In a time, so to speak, outside history, where neither hope nor despair

existed: only the mother of Dottoressa Cuomo, who tried, without ever wholly succeeding, to play a piece by Chopin during a sleepy summer afternoon. Unfortunately, my time gave me no surcease; the Pensione Damecuta awaited me, like a beast in ambush in the grass, ready to spring on me. My time, which wanted me to be in despair, wanted Beate to propose we kill ourselves together, wanted me to feel tempted to accept the proposal. I suddenly asked Sonia: "In the war years, there were many Russian revolutionaries living here at Anacapri, isn't that right?"

"Some, yes. Gorky, for example."

"Lenin, too."

"I don't know anything about Lenin."

"You can't stand Lenin, eh?"

"Would you love somebody who had many of your friends and relatives shot?"

"But did you ever meet Lenin?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"In Paris, before the revolution. One evening, in the house of some friends."

"Did you speak to him?"

"No, I only shook his hand. He held my hand in both of his and pumped it up and down for a while, smiling, as if he had met an old friend. But it was really the first and last time we saw each other."

"What was he like?"

"Then he was just another émigré. I remember that one leg of his trousers was longer than the other."

I felt disappointed, as I had on discovering she knew nothing about German literature: to meet Lenin and remember only that one trouser leg was longer than the other! I wanted to change the subject; I said, cruelly: "I

saw you from my window, giving the headwaiter some money. What were you paying him for? Something he's already done or something he's going to do?"

She seemed neither amazed nor insulted by my implication. She looked at me for a moment with her little, slanting eyes: an inexpressive stare; then a smile curled her too-red lips. She said in a smug tone, a bit cynical, like a peasant: "Something he's already done. You always pay afterwards, right?"

"Did he do it long ago?"

"Not that long. Let's say a couple of days ago."

"You like men, eh?"

She shrugged: "The way you like women."

"What makes you say that?"

"You think I didn't realize you were making me lick that stamp deliberately?"

"Deliberately? Why?

"To see my tongue."

"I didn't make you lick anything."

"Of course not. But why did you look at me in that way, then?"

So she, in some unknown fashion, had seen through the postcard ruse. I was embarrassed, and I said to her curtly: "Well, I'll be getting back to the pensione. Goodbye."

"Suit yourself. We'll see each other again."

I took a few steps then, suddenly, despair attacked me, in the form of the awareness that, later in the night, only cowardice would keep me from killing myself with Beate. Strangely, this same encounter with Sonia now devalued life in my eyes, at the very moment when I was trying to live it, by equating it with the darting of a moist and scarlet tongue between the withered lips of an old woman. At this thought, I felt a kind of squalid

horror; even though it was very hot, I shivered and I saw the skin of my bare arms turn to gooseflesh as if at a sudden chill. Almost without reflecting, I shouted: "Wait."

I saw her stop at once; I overtook her; I said to her, somewhat in confusion: "Let's go see the Collection."

She burst out laughing and remarked: "Had second thoughts, eh? But the Collection's closed and, honestly, I can't open it only for you. I'll give you some tea instead: all right?"

And so, she dropped the whole pretext, confident that I would make no complaint. I said nothing; I went on walking beside her, my head down, my face shrouded in the smoke of the cigarette clenched between my lips. Mine, I couldn't help thinking, was the attitude of someone who is aroused and tries to hide it. In reality, I thought further, I was about to make love with Sonia. And I was about to do it solely to escape from Beate; that is, to expend on Sonia all my energy, so that I would be completely devitalized when, later, in the night, I would be called on to demonstrate my vitality in a self-destructive fashion. Yes, beyond any doubt it required a great deal of vitality to take your life; frightened, I was girding myself to spend it with this old and lusting woman.

Sonia's voice made me start, as she said: "Here we are." I raised my eyes and looked: the road from Anacapri to Capri at that point emerged from the trees flanking it and had, to one side, a parapet beyond which the sea extended; and, on the other, the rocky face of Monte Solaro. From the mountain's rib a kind of belvedere jutted over the road: I raised my eyes and saw a terrace over the void, with a pair of Doric columns supporting a pergola. A little black marble sphinx, crouched

on the parapet, seemed to contemplate the sea with its shiny, hollow eye sockets. Then I heard a creak and I looked down again: Sonia had opened a small iron gate I hadn't noticed and was inviting me to follow her up a narrow stairway set among the dry walls overflowing with plants.

Again, as I climbed the steps behind her, I was deceived by her slim figure and thick hair. It was a young and beautiful woman I was following; at the top of the steps, love was awaiting me. As if evoked by the act of climbing a stairway, aroused, behind a woman, the now-remote memory of my first sexual encounter returned to me, when I had made a similar climb behind a prostitute, in a provincial brothel. The prostitute, slim, with thick hair like Sonia, but unlike Sonia, barely twenty, had gone ahead of me, holding up her long dress to climb more quickly; filled with desire, I had gone behind her, one step lower, close to her, my nose almost in her buttocks. Why did this particular recollection come into my memory? On closer consideration, it seemed to be because of the similarity of what you might call the interior situation: then I had wanted to make use of the prostitute as a means to free myself from the torment of desire; now I wanted to use Sonia as a means to allay the fascination that was leading me to accept Beate's proposed double suicide.

As if she had sensed my thoughts, Sonia, halfway up the steps, turned suddenly and said: "Shapiro isn't here; he's expected tomorrow. That's better, isn't it? Now nobody will disturb us."

"Where are we going?"

"To my room."

She gave me a sidelong glance, over her shoulder. She caught my look at once and, without hesitation, she

flicked the tip of her tongue in the air for a moment. It was an act of shameless seduction, something the prostitute of my first experience might have done. I couldn't help lowering my eyes, overcome by a vague shame. She added: "I'll make you some Russian tea, with the samovar," which was a strangely folkloristic way of telling me that she would do everything I expected her to do for me.

We finished our climb and came out on the terrace that, a little earlier, I had observed from the road. On one side I saw the wall with the sphinx crouching to observe the sea; on the other, against the mountain, at the end of the terrace, Shapiro's villa, a long low building, half Oriental in style and half Caprese, with large and small doors and windows, framed in white marble, arranged asymmetrically in the façade.

Sonia opened one of the little doors, crossed a tiny marble courtyard, led me along a narrow corridor, then across another court, and finally showed me into a room which, at first sight, seemed to be in great disorder.

There was a stately canopied bed, its sheets rumpled; an antique, baroque writing desk stood against a wall covered with old, faded photographs; an ancient black-and-gold typewriter was enthroned in its center: finally, at the open window overlooking the mountain's rocky flank, I saw a round table with a little tea service and the aforementioned samovar.

Sonia sat at once on the bed, not even pretending to prepare tea for me. "Come, sit here. You don't mind that the bed isn't made? Concettina has the strange habit of doing the cleaning just before supper, so, practically speaking, my bed is always in disorder. Does it bother you, disorder?"

I shook my head. She had grasped my arm with her

impatient, curved hand, like the talons of a raptor, making me fall on the bed beside her. Now, with her fingers spread fan-like along my arm, her hand moved down; she pressed her palm against the back of my hand, thrusting her fingers between mine. She said, then, in a whisper: "You know everything about me by now, even the fact that I give Vincenzo money. But I don't know anything about you. May I ask what you've come to Anacapri for?"

I answered mysteriously, but also sincerely: "I've come to do something very difficult."

"What's that?"

"Stabilize despair."

"What does that mean?"

"To feel despair is right. In my opinion, it should be the normal condition of man. But despair, unfortunately, has a stupid logic of its own that leads, inevitably, to suicide in the end. So I would like to make despair intelligent, regulate it the way you regulate the temperature of a bath, stabilize it at a certain number of degrees, no more and no less."

She looked at me, disappointed and uncomprehending. She said, finally: "I don't understand you, you talk like an intellectual, and I'm not an intellectual. And this is why you came to Anacapri? Why Anacapri rather than some other place?"

I wanted to act the lover, while remaining within the confines of my plan: "I had a kind of premonition that, at Anacapri, I would find a woman who would help me achieve my purpose; and, in fact, I found you."

This she understood. A light of complicity glowed in her little slanting eyes. She asked, in an intimate voice: "What attracts you most about me?"

And so, I thought, everything was heading toward

the aim I had in mind; Sonia, even in her dull-wittedness, or rather, thanks to it, was ready to go along with me. I said ambiguously: "You know already."

"What?"

I thought the honest answer would have been to grab her by the back of the neck and bend her mouth toward my groin. But I realized I was incapable of doing something so simple and so mechanical, like a customer with a prostitute: Sonia's age, her assumption that I was attracted to her inspired some kind of respect in me. Now she had turned toward me on the bed and, though still kneading my hand with hers, she was visibly panting, her heavy respiration revealing, beneath the thick, opaque fabric of her blouse, a bosom of unexpected shapeliness. I reached out and began to unbutton the blouse, one button after the other. She let me go ahead and remained with her mouth half open, as if she were actually waiting until the last button was undone before letting out a horrified cry. But the blouse opened wide over a white cotton brassiere, filled, swollen, taut, and no sound escaped her mouth. Then I began working on the edge of the bra and pulled it down with angry violence. She let me proceed, once again; she sat erect, one breast inside the bra and the other out. It was a dark breast, with a network of blue veins, very ramified and prominent, at first sight like the breast of a young woman; but the nipple was withered at the tip, and the whole globe of dark and tender flesh seemed supported not so much by its own solidity as by the network of bluish veins. I was suddenly anxious to act fast, to get it over with. All at once, I realized that I had dug my fingers into Sonia's hair and was pulling her toward me, she was bending over obediently, following her hair. She allowed her cheek to be pressed against my trousers, her mouth open;

and she remained there, waiting, her eyes staring straight ahead, her whole body bent sideways in a pathetic position, like a condemned man with his head on the block, waiting for the executioner's invisible ax to chop it off. I had a moment's hesitation; then I released her hair and asked, in a low voice: "Would you like that?"

Then, to my surprise, her head, there on my lap, spoke in the direction of the member swelling my trousers, and said: "Yes, I'd like it, but you scare me."

"Why? Don't I act the same as Vincenzo?"

"With Vincenzo it's different. He doesn't make me feel old. You do."

"Why do you think I make you feel old?"

This time she shifted her position before answering me. She sat up again, carefully replaced her breast inside the bra, and buttoned up her blouse; finally she looked me in the face: "I saw something in your eyes that scared me."

"Don't you know what it was?"

"Something evil. You know, like the eyes of kids when they're torturing a cat or a dog."

I said humbly: "I'm sorry."

"It's nothing. Now I'll prepare you some tea."

She got up and fussed over the samovar. I took a furtive glance at my watch and saw that of the six hours that, when I left the pensione, had separated me from the meeting with Beate, barely a single hour had gone by. Another five hours! I looked at Sonia and thought I had been mistaken about her: she wasn't, she couldn't be a means to free me from Beate's spell; all the same, for some reason or other, I had a presentiment that she would still help me achieve my end. But how? I thought I could spend the hours until the now-inevitable encounter with Beate trying at least to understand why I

had been mistaken. I said, with sudden inspiration: "You know what I think? I think it's really true that, without knowing it, you were awaiting me at Anacapri, to help me stabilize my despair."

She shook her head: "My dear, I told you before: I don't understand you. You remind me of certain intellectuals in Russia before the revolution. They talked like you, and I didn't understand them then, either."

I protested, almost shouting: "But it's so clear! For a long time, you've achieved, by yourself, what I'd like to do now. Tell me how you managed."

She held out the teacup to me and said, good-humoredly: "Now I know even less than before what you want from me. You say such difficult things. Though," she added, with a hint of regret, "if you let yourself go, everything would be so easy."

I pretended not to hear. I insisted: "All the same, I'm sure you've carried out a certain operation. It couldn't be otherwise."

"What operation?"

"I don't know, but I don't think it would be hard to guess. So let me ask you, finally: who are you?"

She came and sat down on the bed again, this time at some distance from me, her teacup in her hand, like a hostess engaged in an interesting conversation. She said, all at once, firmly: "Since it seems to matter so much to you, I can't think why, to find out who I am, I'll tell you: I'm a dead woman."

I wasn't expecting such an answer, which, if you considered it carefully, was the exact opposite of how I was thinking of her at that moment. I chose to joke, and said: "And when did you die, according to you?"

I saw her reflect for a moment and then answer, gravely: "To be precise, I died on the fifth of January

1909. Now I'm fifty-two, since I was born, in what you might call the physical sense, in 1882. So I died at the age of twenty-seven."

Once again, I was taken aback by this precision; it contradicted my notion, till now, of Sonia as a confused and slapdash person. I protested, again slightly joking: "You died young. And what did you die of?"

"Oh, it's very simple: of disgust."

"Disgust at what?"

"At a certain thing I was asked to do. I didn't do it, and I died."

What strange words, spoken by that withered and slightly monkey-like mouth which, a little while before, had bent without any disgust toward my groin! I couldn't help recalling Rimbaud's verses, which I loved in those days:

Oisive jeunesse
A tout asservie,
Par délicatesse
J'ai perdu ma vie.

I insisted, almost incredulous: "All right, so you died on January 5, 1909; as you say. And what was the thing you didn't want to do?"

She became reticent again, hesitant. She asked me: "Do you really want to know? Or are you asking me because you want to please me? In that case, I must warn you: you're mistaken. It gives me no pleasure at all to talk about my past."

"I really want to know."

"Well, then prepare to listen to a long and boring story."

She was quiet for a moment, then she resumed: "The thing I didn't want to do had been decided by the central

committee of the Revolutionary Socialist Party when it met, precisely, on January 5, 1909, and examined the case of Evno Azev."

"Who was Evno Azev?"

She took a long puff on her cigarette, then said coldly, blowing smoke from her nose: "It disgusted me to kill. Maybe I was wrong, but there it is: I preferred to be a victim rather than an executioner."

"Executioner of whom?"

"We'll skip that: what's the use of digging up the past? It's like digging in a cemetery; you uncover bones that want only to be left in peace."

I said cruelly: "If you don't tell me who you really are, or rather who you were, I'll have to consider you a poor woman of a certain age . . ."

"Go ahead and say old woman!"

"A poor old woman who roams around an Italian village, paying drivers, waiters, sailors, for a bit of love."

"Sailors? Lots of them! How did you guess?"

"Well, Capri's a port."

"Sailors, for that matter, don't ask to be paid. I go out in a boat with them, in the midst of the sea, I sit down on the bottom of the boat, the sailor keeps on rowing, with his legs spread, and everything takes place with the greatest ease, between sea and sky."

With this, as if to show me what happened with such ease between sea and sky, she ran her tongue over her lips and spat out a wisp of tobacco that had stuck there.

Suddenly I had a clear idea: Beate and I are on the threshold, but Sonia has already crossed it, has already done everything we would like to do or should do and lack the courage to do. I insisted, gently: "Sonia, who was the person that the central committee of your party wanted you to kill?"

"Evno."

"Once again: who was Evno?"

"I can tell you what he looked like: a short, squat, stocky man, with a yellow face, a black toothbrush mustache, heavy thick lips, a big flattened nose, jug-ears. A man not the least attractive, with the appearance of a livestock broker, or a grain merchant."

"And his name was Azev?"

"For us comrades it was. For the police it was Raskine."

"I don't understand."

"Evno was a revolutionary and, at the same time, an informer. A very important revolutionary who, in the end, actually became one of the party leaders. But also a very important informer, since, for provocatory reasons, he had the minister Plehwe assassinated."

"How did the rest of you in the party find out that Azev was an informer?"

"Azev was unmasked by Burtzev, in fact, during the meeting of the central committee on January 5, 1909."

"Who was Burtzev?"

"What difference does it make? Let's say he was a comrade. Anyway Evno was sentenced to death by the party."

"And you were supposed to carry out the sentence?"

"That's right."

"I'm sorry, but I'm not very familiar with this sort of thing. For example, there's something I don't understand: Evno had the prime minister Plehwe killed; but he was sentenced as an informer by the party. Now isn't someone who manages to kill a prime minister more a revolutionary than an informer?"

"He didn't do it for revolutionary reasons but for antirevolutionary ones, as a provocation, to give the government an excuse for repression. Subjectively speaking,

that is. Objectively, maybe you're right: Evno, even though he killed the premier for personal reasons, actually favored the revolution."

"What personal reasons?"

"Evno was a Jew; Plehwe was responsible for the slaughter of the Jews in Bessarabia. So Evno, though on the one hand he was performing a revolutionary act in avenging the Jews, on the other was behaving as a provocateur by killing the prime minister. I'm convinced," she suddenly concluded, "that Evno himself, when he looked in the mirror, didn't know whether he was seeing a revolutionary or an informer. He was both, and he was one because he was the other, and vice versa."

"Now let's talk about you. You were a revolutionary socialist. What was the Revolutionary Socialist Party?"

"All sorts of things. Chiefly, a party that believed in terrorism as a political method."

"So you were a terrorist?"

"In a way, yes."

I couldn't make the two notions fit: Sonia sticking her tongue out at the driver and Sonia the terrorist. And yet, as I thought somewhat obviously, they were the same person. I asked: "Why were you a terrorist?"

She gave me a fleeting look, then she said coldly, unemphatically, as if repeating someone else's words: "Because I believed in the creation of a better world and I could see no other way to create it, at least in Russia."

"But did you really believe in a better world?"

"Of course."

"And what was this better world supposed to be like?"

She answered with sudden fervor: "A just world, a free world, a beautiful world."

"Just, free, beautiful. But how would it be achieved, concretely, this just, free, and beautiful world?"

She looked at me with irritation. Then she said with definitive firmness: "We believed in a just, free, beautiful world. Period."

"Who's 'we'?"

"We of the idealistic part of the bourgeoisie."

"Then you considered yourself a bourgeoise?"

"Not in the least. I considered myself a revolutionary. But, today, looking at things in perspective, I think I was, yes, a bourgeoise, who wanted the revolution."

"Do you still behave in the revolution?"

"I'm Shapiro's secretary."

"In other words, you don't believe in anything any more."

She was silent for a moment, then said simply: "I believe I'm dead: that's all."

I asked myself, at this point, if there was despair in her voice. And I had to admit that there wasn't "even" despair. I remarked: "You say that in an odd way."

"What?"

"That you're dead."

"How do I say it?"

"As if you were talking about another person."

"I am another person, in fact."

"Who?"

"I'm crazy Sonia."

"Who calls you that?"

"The whole town. Ask anybody, in Anacapri, who I am, and they'll answer: crazy Sonia."

"What is the real, concrete reason, then, for this so-called death of yours?"

I saw her reflect seriously; then she said: "The concrete reason? A pair of shoes."

"What are you talking about?"

"Yes, a very elegant pair of little shoes, probably made in England or France." She lighted a cigarette, then ex-

claimed: "What's this garbage Mariannina gave me! These Giubeks are older than I am!"

I insisted: "What happened with this pair of shoes?"

"Uff! You already know. What happened was that I gave up life, which for me was the party, and I died. A few years later, the party was also dead. But it was too late by then!"

"Too late for what?"

"To be resuscitated, I suppose."

"Let's go back to the shoes. What's the connection between them and terrorism?"

She was silent again for a moment. Then she went on: "I had belonged to the party for a year already, but I hadn't met Evno, even though I had heard a lot of talk about him."

"What did they say about him?"

"That he was one of the bravest, toughest revolutionaries, always ready to attack, always prompt to take the offensive."

"I should think so. He was an informer, an agent provocateur. For an informer it's easy to be brave, an extremist. He has to be, in fact." I wonder why I felt in a competitive mood against that remote figure in Sonia's life. She answered punctiliously: "No, that's not so. He was surely an informer, in the pay of the Okhrana. But he was also a revolutionary."

"How can you be both?"

She reflected a moment. "It's possible. Evno as a young man had been a revolutionary. Now, once you're a revolutionary, you're always a revolutionary, even if you turn traitor. Rasputin sinned deliberately, in order to hate his sin and repent. Perhaps Evno was following a similar course: he betrayed so that he could hate all the more the power that was paying him." She was silent a moment, then added: "Naturally, there was more to it."

"What?"

"I told you Evno was a squat little man, with a paunch, short legs, a sallow face, bilious eyes. But his whole body exuded a kind of wild quality that, from the very beginning, dominated me. He seemed to have such strong appetites, like an animal in fact, that he could allow himself to do anything and, at the same time, the opposite of anything. In reality, it wasn't the revolution he so hungered for; it was life. The revolution was only one of life's many aspects. So, in the end, it has to be said that what made him a revolutionary and, also, an informer, was his hunger for life."

Sonia fell silent for a moment, then went on: "Naturally, Evno was a coarse, vulgar man, sensual, greedy, capable of any base action. But you felt that all this came not from his head, his mind, but from farther down, from his groin, from the very earth on which he set his feet. How could you complain then? It was like complaining about something in an oak tree, whose roots are so deep that they can never be pulled up, only cut off."

"Tell me about the object of your disgust."

"I'm sorry?"

"I mean what the party wanted you to do and you didn't do."

"It all began in Petrograd when we were preparing an operation in which, at the party's orders, I was to participate along with Evno. I was supposed to go into a shoe shop on Tverskaya, pick out a pair of shoes, have them wrapped in a nice package with the shop's name on it, then, a few buildings farther on, meet Evno in a de luxe pastry shop where a certain important man of the Okhrana used to go every day, to have a chocolate. Evno, then, was to come into the pastry shop a little later, carrying a package exactly like mine, with the same paper, from the same shop. But his package would con-

tain a time bomb. We were to sit at a table not far from the man, drink our chocolate, then Evno was to go out with the package containing the shoes, leaving me the one with the bomb. I was to wait exactly five minutes, then go out as well, leaving the bomb package on the shelf of the table, behind the edge of the tablecloth. Immediately afterwards the bomb would go off, destroying the shop, and killing the man."

"I don't understand. Wouldn't it have been simpler and easier to carry a single package, the one with the bomb, and leave it there?"

"No. Because, as you will see, Evno had already alerted the police and I was to be arrested, caught red-handed, with the bomb package. If there had been just one package, Evno couldn't reasonably have asked me to stay in the pastry shop, at the risk of my life what's more, while he went out first."

"I still don't understand. Why did you and Evno have to leave the pastry shop separately?"

"Evno told me he was being shadowed. They knew him, whereas my face was completely unfamiliar. If they followed and arrested him, they would find his package contained shoes. If, on the contrary, we were to leave together, without a package, they would easily remember the package left in the shop; the bomb, that is. In other words, the idea was to put the police on the wrong track, make them follow Evno. All this, mind you, was Evno's version. In reality, the real purpose was to have me arrested with the bomb. The assassination was a provocation. For Evno I was just a poor ordinary girl he was unscrupulously exploiting to impress his superiors in the police by uncovering an international plot."

"Didn't you feel there was something shady in this business of the two packages?"

"No, because I was a novice, and I hadn't yet dis-

covered that, nine times out of ten, complicated things are complicated because they're fishy. And besides, I was so proud of working with the famous Evno! So we met in the pastry shop, each of us with his package. We didn't have much time, but I spent that time looking at Evno!"

"So it was really love at first sight."

"Yes, I'd say it was. I remember that he took a cigar from his pocket. He bit off the tip, then asked me if the smell of a cigar can make me faint. But I told him I adored it. He lighted the cigar and told me that the character in question was already there, at a table to our right, sipping his daily chocolate. I looked, I saw a middle-aged man, highly respectable, with mustache and beard, pince-nez on a ribbon, a silver-headed cane, kid gloves. He looked like my father, only younger. Evno flicked the ash from his cigar with his little finger; he was wearing a cheap ring, with a colored stone, exactly like one of those livestock brokers he so resembled. Then he set the cigar in the ashtray, took a large silver watch from his vest pocket, and asked me if I had a watch. I said I did, and I showed it to him: it was a little gold watch on a chain: my mother had given it to me for my eighteenth birthday. Evno compared the times, found they were the same; with his forefinger he pointed out, on the watch's face, the precise time I was to leave, and he said these words: 'At twenty past, get up and go, then meet me at my house.' He gave me the address of his house, took the package with the shoes, and left. I put my watch in my lap and began to follow with my eyes the minute hand which, one click after another, was circling the face. The package with the bomb had remained where Evno had set it, on the table shelf, hidden by the cloth: I could feel it if I moved my knees. I

remember that, while my eyes kept following the hand, I was wondering how many customers and waiters would die in the explosion along with the Okhrana man, and I was surprised to find myself so insensitive and without remorse; I didn't know whether to attribute this indifference to political fanaticism or to my already blazing passion for Evno. I was still seated, my eyes on my watch, when, all of a sudden, a hand was placed on my shoulder and a voice said to me: 'Police.'"

"What did you do then?"

"I was more dead than alive. I stammered out something; I realized the bomb was about to go off, and I no longer went along with the fanatical idea that I should let myself be killed in the explosion along with the policemen and the Okhrana official. Strange to say, the thought of dying, never seeing again the man who, just a little earlier, had made such a deep impression on me, made me want to live. At the same time, another source of confusion: I was thinking that if the plot failed, Evno would never look me in the face again. What a lot of things go through your head at a moment like that! Luckily for me, the two policemen resolved my confusion. One of them stuck a hand under the tablecloth, pulled out the box, and asked me what was inside it. 'Shoes,' I said; and then I closed my eyes as if I felt faint: actually, there were only another two minutes until the explosion."

"And so?"

"So this meant I had time to get up and leave the shop. You won't believe it, but all of a sudden I was paralyzed by the thought: 'I'll die along with the policemen and the Okhrana man, and that way Evno will know I sacrificed myself for the cause and then I'll become a heroine in his eyes and he'll love me for the rest

of his life.' As you can see, a moment before, I had wanted to stay alive for Evno, and now, with the very same enthusiasm, I wanted to die for him. Once I had reached the decision to die, I remember I felt a great calm. With indifferent eyes, I watched the agent tear the paper off the package; I even noticed his fingernails were dirty and I thought: 'They're peasants, or sons of peasants: how could they have clean nails?' "

"Forgive me for interrupting, but why was the agent tearing the paper off the package so nonchalantly? Wasn't he afraid of the bomb?"

"He wasn't afraid because Evno had told the police the bomb had been defused."

"Then what happened?"

"I was ready to die, as I said. The paper is torn off, the agent opens the box, and sees . . . a pair of shoes."

"No bomb?"

"No, no bomb."

"How was that? Did Evno make a mistake and carry away the bomb package instead of the one with the shoes?"

"Yes, that's what happened, only it wasn't a mistake. He did it on purpose: I learned this much later. At the time, he told me he had made a mistake."

"What made him do it on purpose?"

"Evno had never seen me before that day. The minute he laid eyes on me, he was seized by violent desire. I say desire, but I should really say appetite, because, in this case, that's the more suitable term. To see me was to want me, and decide to foil the false explosion and my consequent arrest, in order to possess me at once. Later I remembered that during the very short while he was at the table of the pastry shop, though he went on smoking his cigar, he never took his eyes off my

bosom. It was summer. I was wearing a little white linen blouse, very fine; perhaps my nipples could be seen through it; I believe those two dark spots at the end of my breasts were enough to make him forget tsarism, revolution, political faith, ideology, and betrayal. So he took the bomb package with him and left the pastry shop almost at the very moment the police were coming in. Naturally, at the sight of the shoes, they couldn't conceal their surprise; they stepped aside for a moment and conferred among themselves. From my table, I watched them and waited: an immense, boundless, joy, comparable to that of a believer who has witnessed a miracle, filled my spirit."

"Just a moment. Evno told you later he made a mistake, that he had picked up the wrong package. But wouldn't it have been better for him to tell the truth: that is, that he wanted to save you, out of love?"

"Evno probably didn't want to spoil my picture of him as a revolutionary. He knew that the more he seemed a fanatical revolutionary, the kind who put the revolution before everything else, the more I'd love him. Telling me he had chosen to save me out of love was the same as saying he placed love before the revolution."

"And what did he tell the police, to explain the failure of the plot?"

"I never found out. Evno seldom ran short of lies. No doubt he invented something."

"We last saw the policemen conferring. Then what did they do?"

"They came back to me, apologized, and left. A moment later, I also left, got into a carriage, and gave the driver Evno's address."

"With him, what happened?"

"He made a great show of joy, sincere for that mat-

ter, even if it was, so to speak, for private reasons. He hugged me, whirled me two or three times around the room, as if we were waltzing, then he said, with sudden and false nonchalance: 'Now let's have a look at the shoes?' "

"Why false?"

"Wait. He opens the box, takes out the shoes. They were little boots, the kind that were fashionable then, that came halfway up my calf, with holes and laces. He looks at them with amazement, then jokingly says I've earned them, they're a present to me from him. And now he's going to put them on me; he wants the privilege of lacing them up himself. No sooner said than done, he kneels down in front of me, and just like a clerk in a shoeshop, takes my foot in his lap. First of all, he removes the old boots I'm wearing, all run-over and muddy; already, as he's taking them off, he runs his hand up my legs, way up, above the knee. I feel I should protest, but I'm terribly aroused, it almost takes my breath away. I suddenly understand that I'm willing, indeed eager, to do whatever he wants. He takes my bare foot in the palm of his hand, strokes it for a long time, and then, thrusts my foot between his legs, placing it right on his member. At the same time he's muttering strange words, among which I can make out 'Excellency,' the title that in Russia at that time inferiors normally used toward superiors. Immediately after the word 'Excellency,' I make out the word 'Princess,' and then I understand: he's exciting himself with the idea that he's a servant and I'm some duchess or princess."

"But weren't you noble?"

"Noble, yes, but not a princess. The minor provincial aristocracy. Now, I felt only confusion, excitement, desire. I don't know what came over me, I pressed my

bare foot hard on his member. Then, meekly, he prompted me: 'Call me slave, call me serf; tell me I'm your slave, your serf.' "

"What did you do?"

"I obeyed him; I told you I had already made up my mind to do whatever he wanted. I started calling him 'slave' and 'serf,' and meanwhile he was moving my foot, massaging his member with it. All of a sudden, I don't know why, perhaps because I had identified myself with the princess role, I took my foot from his hands and gave him a kick in the chest, making him fall backwards. He immediately got up again and flung himself on me."

"You were a virgin?"

"Yes."

"So that's how you lost your virginity."

"No, I didn't lose it that day. I lost it some time later, when Evno made up his mind to treat me like a woman."

"What does that mean? What happened then, that day, with Evno?"

"Many things, and nothing. He raped me; I mean, he sodomized me. It was his way of repaying the kick I had given him in the chest. First he pretended to be a servant kneeling before his mistress; then this same servant flung himself on his mistress and sodomized her. Ah, yes, there was a lot of politics at the origin of all this. For him I was also a symbol, and first this symbol had to be outraged, profaned."

Sonia told the story of the beginning of her affair with Evno in a tone of absolute detachment. I noticed the way she pronounced the word *sodomized*, a taboo word that most people, in referring to themselves, would not have uttered without putting it between the quota-

tion marks of revulsion and outrage; it was the tone of absolute indifference that comes from a long habit of indifference. This tone was reinforced, so to speak, by the Caprese accent, a kind of linguistic mask behind which Sonia hid her true countenance, if one were actually left her. I asked, after a brief silence: "How did your love then develop, afterwards?"

"For a long time, even after we made normal love, he wanted me to repeat the scene of our first time: with him kneeling, my bare foot in his lap, and me giving him a kick; then him flinging himself on me and sodomizing me. I did as he wished because I loved him; in reality, I felt almost nothing in the physical sense, only pain. Basically, I conceived of love in the romantic manner: I was a girl from a good family, I had been brought up with the idea of the great love which was to be followed by marriage. All this, obviously, I had rejected the moment I entered the party; but nevertheless, I still believed in it, though never confessing as much to myself. Evno, on the contrary, wasn't a romantic; he was a lustful pig; I was fascinated by this pig and I didn't see him as he was but as he wanted to be seen."

"How was that?"

"As an intrepid revolutionary, clear-thinking, master of his nerves. Mind you, he did have these qualities; only he put them at the service of something still more dangerous than the revolution."

"You mean being an informer?"

"Not exactly. I would say provocation more. An informer seeks the truth; the provocateur constructs it."

"But why was he an agent provocateur?"

"Apparently because he needed money: he liked to live well. But perhaps, basically, especially, to feel powerful, to be able to say to himself: 'It's not the

revolutionaries or the police who call the tune: I'm the one who calls it.' "

"Let's go back to what we'll call your private life. What was your relationship with Evno like?"

"I thought it was the relationship between two party comrades who also loved each other. Actually, it was the relationship of a bourgeois with his whore."

"Why whore?"

"Judge for yourself. Evno showered presents on me; it was his way of showing me his love. Actually, he was trying to corrupt me, that is, to make me like himself. Since he obviously couldn't make me an informer, he was trying to exploit my vanity and make me into a kept woman."

"But how did he justify these expenses to you?"

"He told me a pack of lies. For example, that his father was a very well-off merchant. Instead, his father was poor; he had a little clothing shop in a small provincial city."

"Where did all that money come from, then?"

"From the revolutionary committee's funds, plus the police funds."

"How did you discover Evno was an agent provocateur?"

"It was when I realized I was pregnant."

"Why then, exactly?"

"This is how it happened: I was suffering the usual disturbances women have when they're expecting a baby. I went to a doctor, he told me I was pregnant, and naturally I was happy. I loved Evno and I thought that the child would strengthen our love. So I told him."

"How did he take the news?"

"He hugged me and kissed me and went into a wild, improvised dance. I believe he was sincere; the idea of

having a son exalted his vitality. Then he wanted us to go out then and there, straight to a jewelry store; he wanted to solemnize the birth of our child by giving me a ring."

"How did you react?"

"Me? You can imagine: I was happy to see him so happy. We went out, took a carriage to a shop, one of the best in Petrograd. It was an English-style place, luxurious but discreet and solid, a place you could trust, as they say, with all sorts of mahogany cabinets and cupboards, and a big counter where, under the glass, you could see countless jewels displayed in velvet-lined cases. We're received by a young clerk, very well dressed, very formal, small, dark, eyes black as coal, a hooked nose, a big mouth hidden by a thick, drooping mustache. The shop intimidated me; when Evno told me he wanted to give me a ring, I hadn't expected such a luxurious place; I was thinking of some unpretentious little shop, a paternal old jeweler, a modest ring. Evno now asks to look at rings; the clerk takes a box from the glass case with a number of cheap rings. Then, to my amazement, Evno rejects it and points, beneath the glass, to a simple but very expensive ring: a gold circle with a huge, dark-red ruby, the kind known as pigeon's blood. The clerk hands it to him; Evno turns to me, takes my hand, and slips the ring on my finger, just like a groom with a bride, at the altar. I don't know what came over me at that moment; suddenly I had a kind of vision: Evno, stark naked, with his hairy belly and back, slipping the ring on my finger; and I'm also naked, my belly stuck out, where there is our child, as I receive the ring, and behind the counter, like an altar, instead of the clerk, there's the devil, also naked, with his horns and his hairy goat legs, the devil in person, joining us in matrimony forever, according to his ritual and his law."

"Then what did you do?"

"I quickly took off the ring, set it on the counter, and started to leave. Evno must have realized something, because he pointed to an armchair and muttered to me to wait for him there. I obeyed; my head was spinning, I felt a profound malaise, I tried to blame it on my pregnancy. As if from the depths of a dense fog, I saw Evno buy the ring. Calm, methodical, he paid with a bundle of banknotes, putting them one after the other on the counter, counting them in a low voice with his thick, mustachioed lips. Then he took the ring case, dropped it into his pocket, and signaled me to follow him; the clerk rushed to open the door for us; we went out."

"And then?"

"In the street he said to me in a whisper: 'Fool, don't you realize it's an investment?' I was all confused; we got into the carriage; we went home. Silently we enter our apartment; Evno says to me immediately: 'Now we pack.' I'm ready to faint, at some unknown, frightening presentiment; in a wisp of a voice, I ask him what's happened, where we're going. He sits down beside me, on the bed, strokes me, then says: 'We have a child, the time has come for us to talk, you and I, because a new life is about to begin for us and from now on I want everything to be clear between us, with no more deceit or lies.' I still don't understand. I stammer: 'But what deceit? what lies?' He looks at me, paternal and indulgent, and then explains: 'I wanted to keep you out of all this, but it isn't possible. You work with me; and besides, we're lovers: how could I have avoided involving you? But now everybody believes that you're the same as me. The police believe it, and that's not serious. But unfortunately our comrades on the central committee also believe it, and they never forgive.' A great chill seized me, like a blast of sudden north wind, and

I asked in a whisper: 'For God's sake, what is it the central committee believes?' And he answered, softly: 'They believe you're an Okhrana agent, like me.' "

"That's what he said?"

"Yes, those were his exact words. I don't remember clearly what happened afterwards. I stammered, I choked, I thought I was delirious. Then he became angry just like a rational person who is forced to deal with a crazy woman. He grabbed me by the arms, he began to shake me with such violence that I could hardly breathe. While he was shaking me, he shouted that he was my man, that I had to stick with him, had to follow him to the end, that I had to follow him anyway because the committee was convinced we were both members of the Okhrana and, in all likelihood, by now they had already sentenced us to death. So I was to stop carrying on and start packing at once; we had no more time to waste."

"What did you do?"

"I remained motionless for a moment, like someone who isn't taking things in. Then, God knows why, I asked where we would go. Pleased by this reasonable question of mine, he promptly answered that he had money, lots of money, in a Swiss bank; so there were ample funds for traveling and seeing the world. We would visit Italy: Venice, Florence, Rome, Naples, Sicily. Then we would go to Egypt: the Pyramids, Aswan, Luxor, the Nile. Then Greece . . . Gradually, as he was talking, he became animated, his voice turned shrill, his eyes kindled with a greedy joy that I knew well: the same he showed when he flung himself on me to make love. He no longer remembered he was a traitor, sentenced to death by his comrades; he already saw himself traveling about the world with the woman he loved. On me, instead, that tourist program of his had

a terrible effect; when he spoke of the Parthenon, I saw myself facing that famous monument, looking at it and, at the same time, thinking that I was an agent of the Okhrana; and then, suddenly, I let out a piercing cry, stood up, and stumbling, knocking over everything in my path, I dashed out of the apartment and down the steps. I was so frantically eager to get away from him that I tripped, had a bad fall, and fainted. When I came to, I saw that I was on the concierge's bed, in her lodge: I was all covered with blood, I couldn't move, my leg was broken."

"And Evno?"

"Vanished. He had carried me unconscious into the porter's lodge and then gone off on his own. But not without leaving me a note in which he told me that, in due time, he would let me have his new address. They carried me to a hospital. I had a miscarriage almost at once. I spent more than two months in bed. My family was informed; my mother came to St. Petersburg. She stayed with a sister married to a government official, and came to see me every day. My mother didn't know about my political activity; my family supported me in St. Petersburg to study at the university where, in fact, I was enrolled in the philosophy department. My leg improved, but I almost hoped I wouldn't recover; I felt fear at the mere thought of leaving the hospital and carrying on again the life called normal but which, for me, as I knew, would be normal only in appearance. I lay there, my cheek against the pillow, I listened absently to my mother's affectionate chatter, and meanwhile I stared out of the window at the sky. I was thinking of nothing: it seemed to me I had been abandoned not only by Evno and the comrades, but also by myself.

"One of those days a girl visited me. I knew her only

slightly, but I knew for sure she belonged to the party. Her name was Elisa, and she was blond and thin, with a sharp, white face, eyes an ugly watery blue, a staring and inexpressive gaze. Like me, she came from a noble family; unlike me, she hadn't rid herself of her formal manners, hypocritical, reticent, and affected, the behavior of our class. I realized at once that she had been sent by the committee, perhaps to kill me. I was impressed by her incredible ability to play her role of the proper, well-born young lady visiting a friend in misfortune. She took tea with me and my mother, she went on for an hour with the silliest chitchat imaginable. At the end, this pretense of hers exasperated me beyond the limits of prudence; suddenly I yelled at my mother: 'Don't you realize Elisa and I have something important to say to each other and your presence is preventing us?' My mother was the sort of person who is easily frightened; you might say she came into the world already frightened. Her eyes opened wide, she was aghast; she hastily got up, told Elisa and me goodbye, said she would be back the next day, and left.

"After my mother went out, Elisa waited for a moment in silence, then she got up, went to the door, and turned the key in the lock. She came and sat down by my bed again and, in a few colorless, precise words, of a bureaucratic nature, to give her voice the impersonal tone of a judge pronouncing sentence, she informed me of the party's decisions: Evno and I had been condemned to death. I was being allowed the possibility to redeem myself and, in due course, perhaps to return to the party, by carrying out the sentence on Evno. In other words, I had to supply the proof of my innocence or, at least, my repentance, by killing Evno. Elisa said all this while staring at me in an embarrassing way, with her

shifty, hyena eyes. Then she added that she had come to visit me not only for the purpose of communicating the sentence but also to give me Evno's current address and the weapon I was to make use of. With this, she took a pistol out of her muff. But I didn't have time to speak or to take the pistol because, suddenly, there was a knock at the door and the maid's voice asked us to open the door: she was carrying my supper tray. In this situation Elisa once again displayed her extraordinary gift for self-control and pretense. She went to the door, opened it for the girl, who came in, set the tray on the table and then, as she did every evening, began tidying up the room. Elisa got up, bent over me and embraced me tenderly, saying: 'My dear, I'll come to see you again in a few days.' And, as she was saying these words, she slipped the pistol under the covers. Elisa went out. The maid came over to the bed, saying she would freshen it up a bit: it looked a mess. I couldn't refuse this thoughtful offer of hers; but, under the covers, I stuck the pistol between my legs, right at the top, with the cold metal against my sex. The girl pulled down the blankets, but not the sheet; the pistol couldn't be seen, but it stuck out a little; so, to hide it, I folded my hands in my lap, as if out of modesty. I was determined, if the maid were to notice the pistol, to tell her I was a terrorist and she had to keep her mouth shut, otherwise I'd kill her. But she didn't notice anything; she tucked in the blankets neatly, then put the supper tray on my lap and went out."

"Afterwards, what happened?"

"I was well by then; I left the hospital and went with my mother to our house in the country, near Moscow. It was already July, with the summer heat and the countryside all green. I finished my convalescence but

was unable to concentrate on anything; I felt as if I were absent from myself. Still, I knew this dazed condition would soon end; the pistol, which I had hidden amid the linen, in a drawer in my bedroom, was there to remind me that very soon I would have to face my dilemma. Elisa, for that matter, had given me a month's time to carry out the sentence; two weeks had already gone by. In this situation, one day I went out for a walk with my mother and some other members of the family. The destination of the walk, which was to proceed entirely on the flat, through a lovely birch wood, was a meadow on the bank of a river; we were planning to spread a blanket on the grass and have a picnic. As we were walking along the path, in the shade of the trees, an incident happened, something very common in such places during the summer season: a viper, coiled in a bright patch of sunlight, enjoying the warmth, frightened by our presence, tried to flee. I was the only one in the party who had a stick, which I used to keep some of the weight off my mended leg. The sight of the viper, still dazed by the sun, as it tried clumsily to glide off the path, instinctively made me jump at it, arm upraised, and kill it with a few well-aimed blows of my cane. The snake didn't try to defend itself; perhaps it didn't even realize where the blows were coming from. It curled into a ball, as if it wanted to hide inside an imaginary maternal womb; but I struck it again, and then it stretched out to its full length, weakly moving in its final death jerks. Finally it lay there motionless, its little triangular head all stained with blood mixed with dust. I turned it over with the tip of the cane, and it didn't move: it really was dead.

"I thought no more about it for the rest of the day. But that same night, the memory of the viper's death came

back to me and I felt keen remorse. It was all very well for me to say to myself that it was a dangerous animal whose bite could have killed me; the memory remained, inexplicable, obscure, and made the argument of danger seem a hypocritical excuse. This remorse was so strong that I hadn't the courage to go to bed: I was afraid of dreaming of the viper and I absolutely didn't want to see it again, not even in a dream. So I sat for a long time in my easy chair, in the darkness, beside the undisturbed bed. Since I didn't want to think about the viper, I decided to direct my thoughts to Evno, to the terrible dilemma of whether to kill him and reenter the party or run away with him and definitively become part of the police. It was a horrible dilemma; but it wasn't the "real" dilemma, as I soon realized. The real dilemma was whether or not it was allowable to kill. In the end, after many hours of wakefulness, I got into bed. I was tired, I thought I would sleep, I deceived myself that the memory of the viper's death had been erased by the far greater concern aroused by my relations with Evno. But I was mistaken: it was not so. I lie down, I fall asleep at once, and there, in my dream the viper appears. It tries to escape and I run after it with the upraised stick. I wake up with a long, anguished moan; for a moment I lie with my eyes wide open in the darkness; I stretch out again, I fall asleep again, and there the dream comes back: the viper escaping and I, above it, with the raised stick. I woke again, bathed in sweat; by now it was day; then I came to an irrevocable decision: I wouldn't go to Evno, to kill him or to run away with him; I would simply disappear not only from Evno's life and the life of my party comrades, but also, so to speak, from my own life. A person can disappear from his own life. I've done it."

"Just one more question, if you don't mind. Did the committee people know you were Evno's mistress?"

"Of course, they knew; but they attached no importance to it; a revolutionary has no husband, no wife, no lover or mistress; he has no relatives. He has only the party. For that matter, I believe they were actually counting on my affair with Evno to put my revolutionary faith to the test, once and for all. I mean, they were obeying the logic of the revolution, which is just as inflexible as the logic of the bourgeoisie. But I no longer wanted to obey any logic. Till then I had seen the world divided between God and the Devil: God was the revolution; the Devil, the bourgeoisie. Now I saw it still divided, but in a different way: on one side there was the bourgeoisie and the revolution . . . on the other, there was me and all the many people like me."

"Then what did you do?"

"That same morning I told my mother the whole truth about what was happening to me, and this eternally frightened woman revealed an unexpected stamina. She wrote a letter to a Russian family living in Nice, gave me some money, helped me pack a suitcase, and accompanied me that same day to the train for Vienna. At the station she told me she approved of me and was proud of me, words that would have pleased me even more if they had come from someone belonging to a society I could approve. That night I crossed the border, and the next night I was already in Nice in the house of that family, a temporary guest while I waited until I could find a job."

"What job did you find?"

"I told you: governess. I was hired in this capacity by an English family wintering on the Riviera; then, from that family, after about a year, I moved on to another

family, Germans this time; and then again to an English family, and so on. In those years there was great demand for governesses among rich European families; we taught the children languages, took them for walks while their mothers went to parties. Occasionally the governess allowed themselves to succumb to the employer's charm. I had excellent references; I could speak English, German, French, and Russian, and as far as bed was concerned, I didn't much object to moving from mine to the boss's, if it was downright necessary. So, as a governess, I spent the years between 1909 and 1922."

"What was special about that year? Was that the year you met Shapiro?"

"Naturally. That year I met him on the Riviera, and he suggested I come and keep house for him at Anacapri. I accepted the offer, and so I landed on the island, and I haven't stirred since, not even to go to Naples. That's the whole story."

"What sort of man is Shapiro?"

Suddenly something strange, unexpected happened. At my question, Sonia looked toward the window, as if she were reflecting. Then she said curtly, with a sudden lapse into the Caprese accent: "Ask him."

She turned her back on me; I insisted, amazed: "You and Shapiro have a certain relationship, which could explain many things. Besides, how can I ask him? I don't know him."

"He's arriving tomorrow; I'll introduce you."

"What's wrong?" At this point, I was thinking, I could no longer ignore the way she had turned her back deliberately and, to my dismay, coyly.

As I had foreseen, Sonia didn't move. She only said, still looking at the window: "Give me your hand."

I stretched my hand out on the bed, where her hand

was lying. She took it, turned it over, palm up, raised it to her mouth. I felt her lips flatten against my palm then glide to my fingers, and here the tongue darted out, thrust between one finger and the next. I realized I was feeling a desire, very different, however, from what she had inspired in me a while before, when she had preceded me up the steps in the garden. Then I had thought to make use of her, a woman I didn't know, of whom I knew nothing, to release the vitality that was making me accept the proposal of double suicide. Now, on the contrary, when we were better acquainted and I knew so many things about her, my desire seemed to suggest to me quite a different plan: to make love with an old and libidinous woman. To be sure, this was also a way of eluding the despair; but, just as surely, it didn't lead to the stabilization of despair, to making it a normal condition of life. At the very moment when Sonia was no longer a means of releasing a dangerous energy, she was becoming a person, the specific person that she had described, telling me the story of her life. I saw myself as Sonia's lover along the little lanes of Anacapri; Sonia's lover in the villa, beneath the eyes of the mysterious Shapiro; Sonia's lover, after she had been the mistress of so many waiters, drivers, sailors. A feeling of horror mixed with some unknown cruelty made me shudder. I violently tore my hand from the tongue that was licking it, sprang to my feet, and quickly left the room. I had time to see that Sonia, perhaps accustomed to this kind of rejection, had remained seated on the bed, facing the window. Then, through the corridors and courtyards I had passed before, I came out of the villa. A few minutes later, I was at the pensione.

In my room, I threw myself on the bed, turned off the light, and waited. I don't know how long I waited. I

would have liked to know the time but I didn't want to turn on the light: the shadows appealed to me, the light horrified me. I was thinking that Beate might come in at any moment; but I wouldn't be able to record for myself the moment of her entrance. In the end, I fell asleep and had the following dream:

I seem to be in a foreign city, very far away, perhaps New York (where I have never been), perhaps Berlin (where I lived for a long time). In this city I live in a de luxe hotel; in fact, at the moment the dream begins, I find myself in a very large room which I assume is the lobby, with enormous chandeliers hanging from the ceiling, groups of easy chairs and sofas, some people seated, others coming and going. I feel a vague anxiety: for reasons I can't explain, I have stayed on in the city long beyond the date I had set; in other words, beyond my financial resources. So I now find myself without money, with the hotel bill and the steamship ticket to Naples (or the train from Berlin to Rome) still to be bought.

The bill was handed me just a little while ago. Sitting in an easy chair in the lobby, I examine it and realize I'm unable to pay it. The emotion I feel at this thought is more like wonder than apprehension: how did I come to behave so heedlessly, so foolishly? Even two weeks ago I had enough money both to pay the bill and buy my ticket; why didn't I think of it then? The strangest aspect of the whole business is that in these two weeks I had nothing special to do: I stayed on only out of laziness. So my sense of guilt is mixed, as I said, with wonder: I didn't know I was so stupid.

Meanwhile, however, I have to resolve the problem of the bill: I tell myself I must do something to gain an extension, or else, more absurdly, a reduction. I get up from the chair, I walk across the lobby, I go to the man-

agement's desk. Without raising my eyes I display the bill, explain in a low voice that at present I'm unable to pay it; I'll pay, definitely, but not right away; they must give me time to get the sum together. Then, strangely, a woman's voice answers me with this extraordinary statement: "Kleist paid without a word!" Equally strangely, I spontaneously exclaim: "Kleist! But times were different then!" At the same moment I raise my eyes, I see that behind the counter Beate is standing, dressed in a kind of military tunic. She says to me sternly: "Are you prepared to pay at once, or aren't you?" Again I protest that I have no money. Beate insists: "Are you absolutely sure?" I shake my head, reply that I am quite sure. Beate answers: "Very well, but meanwhile don't you think it would be proper for you to change hotels? This one is too expensive for you; here's the address of a hotel that will cost you less." Rapidly, she writes something on a slip of paper; then she slams a little bell with her palm. A porter rushes up, loads my suitcase on a trolley; I follow him out of the hotel.

Abrupt change of scene. I enter the room in the new hotel, bare, gray, shabby; and whom do I see sitting in an armchair by the window? Beate, again in masculine dress. She has one leg over the chair arm, her tunic unbuttoned, exposing her breasts. Her whole attitude is relaxed, intimate. I notice all this, but nevertheless I cry: "It's too soon to pay. Didn't you grant me an extension?" Beate doesn't answer me, she merely points to something on the table. It's a pendulum clock, very modern, with a crystal face that allows you to see the mechanism inside. Then I realize that, through the crystal, you don't see the usual workings, but the red triangle of Beate's pubes. Apparently, Beate is standing erect behind the clockface, her abdomen pressed against the glass. But

how can the clock's hands move? Simple: they are applied to her abdomen, their movement is governed by her most secret and private viscera. At the same time, I hear her voice calmly telling me that I will have to pay at twelve o'clock: now the small hand is at one minute to twelve and it is moving with a rapidity that fills me with anguish. I think again that I haven't the money and can't pay, I approach the clock, I want to open it, turn back the hand, delay its inflexible progress by a few hours. There is a sudden knocking at the door; I tell myself it's Beate, not the one of my dream, but the one who, in reality, promised to visit me tonight. Confusing dream and reality, I think with relief that now I'll explain everything to her, ask for a discount, indeed, I'll find a way not to pay at all . . . and suddenly I wake with a start in the most complete darkness. The door I had left ajar was slowly opening, over there in the darkness, and what I had awaited all my life was finally happening: Beate, like the angel of death, invisible but real, was entering my room. At that instant, as the door opened without sound or light, I saw my whole life, as you see an entire landscape from the top of a tower, to the most distant horizon; and I observed lucidly that I had no reason to live and that I was ready to let Beate take me by the hand and, with her, to cross that other threshold, beyond which, after our pleasure, as Nietzsche's verse said, there was eternity waiting for us.

The door opened completely; in the dense darkness, I felt Beate's presence as she silently approached the bed. I murmured "Beate . . ." and I woke up, really, this time.

It was day by now. A glance sufficed for me to see that the door of my room had remained ajar as it was the evening before: Beate hadn't come, I had only dreamed; I had dreamed I was dreaming and then waking, and

then dreaming again. Then I had a kind of enlightenment: surely something or someone had waked me. I jumped down from the bed and went to the window.

In the dawn, the garden stood out against the white sky with motionless trees that seemed exhausted or as if weighed down by shreds of night still caught in the boughs. At that very moment a little procession was coming out of the front door. First came a porter laden with suitcases; Beate's husband followed, in his crumpled duck suit; and finally there was Beate, her head hidden in a great straw hat, wearing a green blouse and a flowered skirt; she looked like a Tyrolean peasant.

The three crossed the yard and disappeared into the drive. I closed the window, undressed, went to bed, swallowed two or three very strong sleeping pills from a supply I kept in case of insomnia. I fell asleep almost immediately.

VIII

My sleep was restless, transparent, and I felt as a widower might if he had lost his wife the previous day and, even in sleep, sensed the still incredible absence of the beloved woman every time he stretched out his hand on the bed beside him and, instead of the warm living body, found the cold and deserted sheet. Beate wasn't my wife, she wasn't dead, and I had never slept with her; still, in that uneasy sleep, agonizingly besieged by awareness, I felt all the time that, in going away, Beate had—how could I put it?—halved me, thus confirming the proprietary origin of the popular usage of defining one's spouse with the word *half*. Yes, I thought, when, after a vain attempt to prolong my sleep, I conclusively woke up, Beate had gone and the couple that we had ideally

formed in those few days, a couple bound by the same mysterious and fatal affinity that had bound Kleist to Henriette, had dissolved probably forever, and I had returned to solitary despair, after having known, for a short time, despair in company. Now, I thought further, I could calmly resume my plan of stabilization; but how could I begin living again in the old way, when I now lacked the relationship with Beate which gave my life a meaning and an aim? And it mattered little that the meaning and the aim were suicide. Even a plan for death seemed preferable to no plan.

There was something further that, beyond our suicidal complicity, I was now lacking after Beate's disappearance: the sensation of loving and being loved, for the first time in my life, for reasons that could only be called spiritual. As I thought, dwelling on those few days for which the extraordinary rapport between Beate and me had lasted, there hadn't been even a kiss between us, not even a caress, not even the grazing of an arm; there had been nothing but looks; and these looks had aimed only at inspiring an emotion far removed from a physical relationship, but rather based, as we had discovered in the end, on affinities of character, ideas, and destinies. As always happens when feelings are genuine, our relationship had been at once tentative and tenacious: I had first desired, then feared, then desired again, and then feared again, and so on and on, to love this woman I didn't know, about whom I knew nothing, with whom I had only exchanged glances. To be sure, I realized that the word *spiritual* is one of those words to be used with care. But how else could I define a relationship that aimed at the destruction of our bodies, that is, of everything that makes up the physical part of love?

I followed these thoughts, as I lay on the bed, though

I kept telling myself I should get up as soon as possible. And, at the same time, I felt an overpowering reluctance to do so: I knew that getting up meant, for me, facing my familiar mediocre despair, what you might call my pre-Beate despair, crouched in daily life like a beast in the grass of a jungle. I thought that as long as I remained in bed, I could daydream about possible avenues of escape, the chief one being, in fact, daydreaming; but the moment I got up I would have to act, even if only to go down to the dining room and have lunch. And I knew that the beast at that point would infallibly assail me.

But life had to go on. I looked at the alarm clock on the dresser and I told myself I would get up at noon precisely. It was eleven-thirty: a half hour in which to make up my mind seemed enough for me. But noon came without my moving. At twenty past, for no reason, as if only because of an automatic click of my body, I jumped out of bed. A little later I was already at the stop, waiting for the bus that would take me down to the Piccola Marina.

Thus the first day of the post-Beate period began. It is significant that, once I was at the Piccola Marina, I went through the usual beach routine with enthusiasm, if not with downright joy; recognizing, as I did so, yet another aspect of despair: despair as not feeling despair. Somebody ran into me as, dripping wet, my damp hair over my eyes, I was walking, hopping over the sharp, burning stones, toward the board from which I had just dived, and asked me: "How's the water?"—the casual question of one swimmer to another. To my surprise, I heard myself answer: "Wonderful!" And so, I couldn't help thinking bitterly, as I looked down from the board at the sea water three or four meters below, glinting briefly in the sun and curling, smooth and gleaming,

around the cliffs, I had bartered the void into which you plunge to kill yourself for the one in which, with impeccable form, you plunge in a dive; and—why not admit it?—I was enjoying myself there.

After lunching at the beach restaurant, eating little and listlessly, and for the most part looking, charmed and dreamy, at the sea of the early afternoon, a wrinkled and glittering sea from which the northwest wind lifted wisps of white foam, I had a moment of well-being of which I was actually ashamed. I sat at the table in my trunks, my chest bare, I felt over my whole body the pleasant sensation of salt mixed with sun; meanwhile, my idle mind indulged in silly fantasies of this sort: "Here certainly, under this very cliff, twenty centuries ago, the Roman sailors landed, with the ship bringing the old emperor Tiberius to Capri. But then, what millennium am I in? Has time really passed or has it remained motionless?"

After lunch, I went and stretched out in a deck chair, my body in the sun and my head in the shade, and I started rereading the volume of Kleist's letters, which I had brought with me, perhaps in the hope of finding there the explanation of Beate's unforeseen departure. I read, at random: "Life is the one property that has some value only when we don't prize it. It is despicable not to know how to renounce it for great ends; only he who is capable of throwing it away easily and serenely can make use of it. He who loves it profoundly is already morally dead, for his supreme vital energy, that of being able to sacrifice his life, in fact, rots away as he cultivates it. And yet how inscrutable is the will that rules us! This mysterious thing is given us, we know not by whom, draws us, we know not where, is our property and we do not know if we can command it, a property that is worth

nothing when we give it value, a kind of contradiction, superficial and profound, barren and rich, worthy and contemptible, with many meanings and inscrutable. Are we not perhaps forced to love it by law of nature? We should tremble in the face of annihilation which, however, cannot be painful as existence often is; and some, as they regret the sad gift of life, must sustain it with food and drink and keep burning the flame that neither illuminates nor warms."

And then, further on: "Life, in fact, has nothing sublime about it, save this: that it can be thrown away with a sublime act."

I went on reading in the book here and there; then I set it aside and sank into deep meditation. Naturally, I said to myself, beyond what might be called a man's private motives for taking his life, there were also what might be called the public motives. Now, in Kleist and in me, these motives were at once similar and different. They were similar because Kleist had found in the condition of the Germany of his time the same valid, albeit generic, justification for taking his life that I found in the condition of Italy at present. But the motives were different because all Kleist's letters shone not so much with the calm bitterness of a definitive disappointment but rather with the rage of a heroic impatience. Kleist wanted no longer to live because he no longer cherished any hope for himself or for his country; but he did not dismiss the idea that one day, after his death, hope would perhaps return on earth. His was a suicide of impatience. I, on the other hand, though I couldn't bear the world in which I had happened to be born, harbored no illusions about all the other possible worlds, threatened or promised, the positive or negative utopias of my time. True, I didn't like living under Fascism; but I wouldn't

really have wished to live in any future time because I was sure, absolutely sure, that the hope of a better world could only be deceit or illusion.

Strange to say, however, at this point I discovered that Kleist's despair, which was optimistic, all things considered, led straight to suicide, whereas my pessimistic despair allowed me to dream of that kind of institutionalization of despair that I called stabilizing it. Of course, Beate had led me to the very brink of suicide. But Beate had succeeded in making me desire death precisely because from my love for her I had derived the vital energy required in taking one's own life. Without Beate, lacking her, my vitality was no longer exalted in love; and I could only fall back on the plan of stabilization, a wise idea, all in all. On the other hand, however, would Kleist's folly ever have been possible without his love for Henriette? I mean, without that excess vitality, derived from love, which, according to the writer's own words, allowed him to fling life away easily and serenely? And so, gradually, I came to realize that my suicide, if I had ever carried it out, could only have been, in any case and of necessity, a double suicide.

I suddenly became aware that, in the course of these reflections, time had gone by. The sun was no longer directly above my head; an indirect, calmer light spread over the sea. I thought I should get dressed, go back up to Anacapri, try to keep myself busy for the rest of the day: in the stabilization plan, work played an important part. I had three or four hours at my disposal before supper; I would resume my translation of *Michael Kohlhaas*, or perhaps I might try to face the suicide theme in my novel, since I had renounced suicide in real life. After supper, I would take a short, nighttime walk and, at the end, I would go to bed. Life continued even after Beate's

disappearance. Indeed, it continued precisely because Beate had disappeared.

But, in the closed air of the cabin that smelled of damp wood and brine, as I was rapidly dressing, I happened to think of Beate again; this time, however, not as you think of something that is over, but rather of something that is pursuing its course. Why hadn't Beate come last night to the rendezvous which she herself had been the one to set? Why hadn't she somehow let me know that she wouldn't come? Why, finally and especially, had she left the volume of Kleist's letters at the desk for me, with Henriette Vogel's last letter carefully underlined? What, in other words, was the meaning of that kind of injunction implicit in Henriette's letter, when Beate had decided to leave and never see me again?

A little later, in the bus taking me back to Anacapri, I seemed to find an answer to these questions. And the answer was that if I really had such need of Beate, then it was unnecessary to dramatize my sensation of widowhood by renouncing the idea of seeking her, a renunciation which, furthermore, might conceal a fear of the double suicide. Beate wasn't dead and, strictly speaking, she hadn't disappeared; she had simply returned to her own country. And I should do two things, connected for that matter: the first was to figure out what Beate meant to tell me by her contradictory behavior, not keeping our engagement on the one hand but, on the other, leaving the Kleist volume for me at the desk with Henriette's funereal letter underlined. The second, once I was sure Beate wanted to tell me our relationship continued, was to find a way to join her in Germany or elsewhere.

I promptly dealt with the problem of the meaning implied in the Kleist book: it was clear, all too clear, that

Beate was doggedly continuing her ambiguous and mortuary coyness. It was clear, all too clear, that she had no intention of relaxing the grip she had on me and that the broken appointment was to be interpreted as one of her many stratagems to lure me more and more securely toward the final aim of double suicide. Seen in this light, the underlining of Henriette's letter meant: Nothing is over, we must see each other again, I haven't given up suicide, I have only postponed it.

I must say that as I was thinking these things, a shudder ran down my spine, like a dire presentiment; because I felt in myself little or no will to resist Beate, to refuse death with her, and to devote myself instead to my wise, carefully worked-out plan of stabilizing despair.

Now there was still the problem of finding out where Beate was. All of a sudden I realized that, among our various reciprocal messages based on books of Nietzsche and Kleist, we had forgotten the simplest and most essential thing: exchanging addresses. But it was also possible that the oversight was no accident: perhaps, unconsciously, I had created for myself in advance a good excuse not to follow her to Germany in the event that she disappeared.

Nevertheless, I thought further, it wouldn't be hard to get the Müllers' address from Signor Galamini. He must have it, hotels were obliged by law to ask for a guest's home address on his arrival. But this obvious solution was impeded by my revulsion at sharing with others, however indirectly, my bizarre and mysterious adventure. I didn't know how to justify such an enquiry. Any motivation seemed to me a transparent falsehood through which it would have been easy to read the truth: I wanted the address of Frau Beate Müller in order to join her in Germany and kill myself with her.

Then, all of a sudden, with a surprise mixed with suspicion because of its obvious nature, the solution flashed into my mind: I would ask Signor Galamini for the address, explaining that I wanted to send Beate the Kleist volume she had lent me. I liked this solution because it was in keeping with the indirect and mediated nature of our relationship, composed of glances, books, quotations of verses, excerpts from letters.

But a moment later I had the feeling I had set my foot in a trap from which, furthermore, I knew I would make no effort to extricate myself. As soon as I had the address, therefore, I would leave for Germany. The idea of going to Germany, seeking and seeing Beate, attracted me enormously; yes, it was a trap, but I, in a contradictory way, was happy to have fallen into it. Indeed, somehow I saw in it the sign of a funereal and malicious fate that wanted me to become Beate's lover and, immediately afterwards, her companion in death.

Thinking these things, strange to say, I felt a deep emotion, mixed with erotic desire and morbid fascination. In my mind, the notion of trap recalled that of copulation, through the similarity of the two grips, that of the trap and that of the woman's legs during love. I realized I would have been happy to feel Beate's legs lock on my back, in the spasmodic jerk, like a trap's, of orgasm. Immediately afterwards, I thought, it would not be difficult for me to agree to die with her.

The bus stopped; I got out, lost in my daydream, and headed for the pensione along the lanes of the village. I quickly entered the door, went straight to the desk, and said to Signor Galamini, who was intent on transcribing data from some passports: "Excuse me, I need the address of those guests who left this morning, the Müllers, the husband and wife." Signor Galamini raised his eyes and looked at me over the top of his glasses. I immediately

added: "The fact is, Frau Müller lent me a book, then she left unexpectedly before I had time to return it to her. I'd like to send the book to her address in Germany."

Signor Galamini seemed not to understand; obviously, at that moment, he had other things on his mind. All of a sudden he said briskly, like someone eager to be rid of a nuisance: "All right, leave the book with me and we'll see to mailing it off for you."

I was taken aback. As if I had perceived, beyond the semblance of chance, the presence of a higher will at play, a game of mystification. This will had prompted me to get the Müllers' address from Signor Galamini on the pretext of sending the Kleist volume to Germany; but now it was using that same pretext to keep me from having the address. What was I to do? Insist on having the address? Or hand the book over to Signor Galamini and have done with Beate once and for all?

I remained in this doubt for a long moment. Then I blurted foolishly: "I'll think about it," a remark that astounded Signor Galamini as I could tell from the interrogative glance he gave me. I went straight to the stairs. When I reached my room, I flung myself on my bed and automatically opened the Kleist volume. I opened it to the flyleaf. My eye immediately fell on the inscription: 'To my sister, to dearest Beate, from her loving Trude." Again, reading these words, I had the sensation of a superior and spiteful will that, as if in jest, decreed my life. In fact, that inscription reminded me of the existence of the twin sister whose forthcoming arrival on Capri Beate had announced to me. There, the problem of the address was solved. I would ask the sister for it; in fact, it would be a good excuse for introducing myself to her.

Having made this decision, I felt calmer and, some-

how, more free, perhaps because I had actually surrendered my freedom. I leafed through the Kleist book some more, and I read one of the last letters: ". . . As the resolution to die with me blossomed in her soul, she drew me to her bosom, I cannot tell you with what ineffable and irresistible power . . . A vortex of happiness, never before experienced, engulfed me and I cannot deny to you that her grave to me is dearer than the bed of any empress in the world." I lingered over this letter for a long time. Kleist was saying that Henriette's grave was dearer to him than an empress's bed, but he was saying it, as I suddenly thought, because he, in the empress's bed, Henriette's bed that is, had already lain, and there had already tasted that death in orgasm which bears such a resemblance to real death. And so, in the end, it had to be admitted that in the project of double suicide, Beate was strictly following the model, with the mysterious fidelity characteristic of all total identification: first, the empress's bed, that is to say her own, in which we would join and consummate our first and last lovemaking; then the grave without which the lovemaking could not take place with that pleasure which wants eternity, that Nietzsche spoke of in his poem.

The familiar racket of the gong a waiter was carrying around the three floors of the pensione, banging it with reiterated blows in what you would have thought a vindictive violence, tore me from these reflections. I threw the book aside; I rushed from the room.

I went down the stairs, entered the dining room last, after a large group of guests; and so, as I waited for the group to disperse, I had time to look toward the corner where my table was and the table that till last night had been the Müllers', to see if Beate's sister and mother had arrived. Yes, they had arrived, as I could tell at first

glance; or rather, the mother had arrived, but not the sister, because, beyond any doubt, the young woman sitting opposite the mother was Beate.

I took a better look and was convinced that I wasn't mistaken. It really was Beate, with her head of abundant red hair, the triangular, feline face, the green eyes, tiny nose, big mouth. It was she: I even thought I recognized the dress of little green beads, heavy and glittering, which swelled visibly over the protruding bosom.

I was so surprised that I didn't have time to be pleased or displeased by this presence which, throughout the whole day, I had both mourned and feared. My mind, almost automatically, offered me on the spot the only two hypotheses that might explain this unforeseen, incredible appearance: (1) Beate hadn't left and Trude hadn't arrived; only the husband had left; only the mother had arrived. (2) I was the victim of a hallucination.

Strange to say, of these two hypotheses, the first entirely rational and the second based on an irrational premise, the one that immediately appealed to me more was the second. And in that instant of reflection, I also understood why; at heart I didn't really want that female figure to be Beate, perhaps because I didn't want to see her again, or perhaps because I had by now established a plan to see her again in Germany, not here in Anacapri. In other words, the hallucination suited me better in every way.

But this mirage hypothesis lasted the space of a doubt. Then, as the red-haired girl made a movement, resting her chin on her clasped hands, I again recognized Beate, no longer in the physical resemblance but in that gesture; and then I returned to the first hypothesis; yes, it was she, she hadn't left, she had merely accompanied her husband to Naples and had come back with her mother.

This time I realized I was feeling, pure and unalloyed, the joy of a man who unexpectedly encounters the woman he loves: Beate was there, as she had been on the other evenings; I was experiencing the ineffable and immediate moment of unhoped-for rediscovery, finding again something I believed lost. This joy was so strong that, strangely, Beate's incredible presence rubbed off, so to speak, on the person facing her; for a moment, with the automatic mechanism of habit, I imagined that in her mother's place there was still the husband, exactly as in the sister's place there was still Beate. This error provoked by my bewilderment caused me, once I had come up to their table, to remember how on the first day, at the end of the meal, the husband had obliged me to return his Fascist salute: it had been the first of the many "lessons" that Beate's ambiguous spouse had imparted to punish me for courting his wife. And so, quite naturally, as my bewilderment continued, I thought it proper for me to salute Müller with upraised arm. I turned, clicked my heels, made the Fascist salute. But at the very moment I was saluting, my bewilderment ended, and I saw that, while there was no doubt that Beate was sitting at the table, the other person was not Müller but a woman, namely, her mother.

I looked at her as I extended my arm in my absurd Fascist salute. She was a woman of middle age, between forty and fifty, with a dark, thin, stern face; brown, beautiful but somehow demonic eyes, wide in an expression of dismay. The nose was big and straight, the mouth thick, its corners contemptuously turned down, the hair short with two spit curls at the ears, in the fashion called "Bubikopf" in Germany, giving the face a virile look. The black, mannish jacket, the bow tie, also black, against the high, stiff collar of the white shirt, confirmed this impression. I thought that Beate's mother was,

somehow, in uniform; looking at her, I had a sensation of *déjà vu*, as one has seeing uniforms that present no novelty except in the number of stars or chevrons. And in fact, as I looked at her, I couldn't help comparing her face with the faces of Prussian generals photographed from time to time in German magazines, standing stiffly in a reviewing stand, watching a regiment march past. Beate's mother was not surprised by my Fascist salute, she took it as something normal; she replied with a sober nod. But, at the same time, something happened that reversed my conviction that I was standing before the woman I loved. I saw, in fact, Beate, or rather the one I had mistaken for Beate, study me with surprise, then put her hand over her mouth as if to stifle a laugh. She was laughing at me, as Beate would never have done, without melancholy, gaily, her eyes shining slyly. Then it began to dawn on me that this was not Beate but rather a complete stranger, her twin sister Trude.

Meanwhile, the laughter went on, perhaps more merry than mocking. Then Trude (from now on, this is what I'll call her) bent toward her mother and whispered something to her. In her turn, the mother said to me with dry cordiality, in a harsh but correct Italian: "Are you not, perhaps, Signor Lucio?"

"Yes, I am. I'm Lucio."

"My name is Paula; I am the mother of Beate and Trude. You must not misunderstand Trude's laughter. She is not laughing at your salute but at the fact that, to all appearances, you have taken her for Beate. It happens often; you are not the first. In fact, they look very much alike, and your mistake is entirely justified."

I couldn't help asking, stupidly: "But where is Beate?"

Trude spoke up, also in Italian, and this knowledge of my language, which Beate had never given any sign of, again surprised me and made me realize that I still, as the

saying goes, could not believe my eyes. "Beate is in Germany. Why? Would you rather my sister were here instead of me?"

"No, but . . . you're right, I had taken you for Beate."

"We're not identical, however. For example, look at this mole here. Beate doesn't have one."

It was true. At the corner of her mouth, Trude had a very pretty and quite evident mole that underlined the feline aspect of the triangular face. Trude went on, still in a bright tone: "Beate has no moles. I have another one, but it's in a place you can't see. Even I have to make a terrible effort if I want to see it."

Her mother, as if to silence her daughter, made haste to say: "Beate has spoken to us a great deal about you . . ."

Her daughter immediately protested, laughing. "Mamma's afraid I'll tell you that my other mole is on my behind."

Her mother confined herself to uttering a reproachful "Why, Trude!" Then she went on, finishing her sentence: "Beate told us you speak German very well."

Trude interrupted again: "I have something else, too, that Beate doesn't have: an immense longing to enjoy the sun, the sea, Italy!"

She laughed, looking at me, her gaze sparkling with joy, quite different form Beate's grim, unhappy, despairing glances. I stammered, addressing the mother, not knowing what to say: "Actually, both of you speak Italian very well. Beate didn't speak it at all."

"I should hope we do. For years I was the manageress of a hotel in Lugano. When I divorced my husband, the girls were still little. I took Trude with me to Lugano. Beate went to live in Munich with her father. This explains why Trude speaks Italian and Beate doesn't."

I sat down with a feeling of confusion. First of all, I

was angry with myself for having given the Fascist salute a second time. Further, I felt frustrated by the extraordinary physical resemblance of the two sisters, a resemblance which, on the contrary, didn't extend to their character, apparently. Why did this resemblance irritate me? Because Trude's character, at least to judge by what little I had understood, seemed to me such that its every aspect amounted to a profanation of the ideal image of Beate I had conceived. For example, the word *behind*, accompanied by a sly laugh—a word Beate would surely never have uttered—had had a strange effect on me: as if, mysteriously, it had changed the shape and color of the lips that had spoken it, lips similar, a moment before, to Beate's, and from now on, utterly different.

These thoughts about the frustration inspired by Trude, so like Beate and at the same time so different, impelled me to observe her with greater attention: thus, noting one by one the differences, I would convince myself completely that the two sisters were different in every respect and I would no longer feel frustrated. I promptly discovered, to my relief, a basic difference: Trude, as if competing with Beate unawares, had also initiated a remote dialogue, using not words but actions. But what actions? While Beate, her attitudes full of grim and funereal despair, had suggested to me the comparison with the anguished angel of Dürer's *Melencolia*, Trude behaved in the opposite manner, so as to suggest certain female figures, of ambiguous and perverse vitality, portrayed recently, in the postwar years, by expressionist painters in the manner of Kirchner or Müller. For example, Beate had always eaten very little, seeming to do so with an effort and with repugnance; Trude, on the contrary, after heaping her plate to the brim with spaghetti, started eating with the exaggerated movements

that, in the clumsy consumption of this dish, foreigners attribute to the Italians. She would twist an excessively large ball on her fork, then pretend she couldn't get it into her mouth; she would raise the fork high in the air, then stick her open mouth under it, so as to snatch the dangling spaghetti in midair; she would suck the strands one by one, noisily, staining her mouth with tomato sauce; she would lick the tomato from her lips, sticking out a thick tongue that reminded me of Sonia's; finally she tried to pluck the last strand from the bottom of the plate with her fingers, dropped it into her mouth, then licked all five fingers, one after the other. All of this while looking up at me, her eyes sparkling with sly roguishness.

Then it was the turn of the fish that the waitresses were carrying around the room on long oval serving plates. There were big mullet, boiled and served with lemon and mayonnaise.

The mayonnaise was served separately, in a sauceboat. I saw Trude put a spoonful on her plate, thrust her forefinger into it, and withdraw it, a thick yellow curl on the tip. She stuck her finger into her mouth, slowly and gradually, drew it out again equally slowly and gradually, looked at it questioningly, put it in again, then drew it out again. Meanwhile, she kept looking at me as if to see if I grasped the meaning, hardly obscure, of that mime, which referred so explicitly to sexual penetration. I grasped it quite well; only I couldn't understand how we had come to this kind of allusion. What had happened between us that made her feel entitled to say wordlessly that she was prepared to make love with me? I lowered my eyes, embarrassed; then I raised them; Trude was, so to speak, lying in wait for me; she quickly gave me a wink, smiling with merry self-confidence.

I looked at the mother. She seemed to make it a point of honor to eat properly, her elbows tight against her ribs, her eyes down, the cutlery held with the tips of her long, thin fingers. She was frowning; it was clear she was taking care to ignore her daughter's behavior. Then Trude bent abruptly toward her and said something in a low, excited voice. A surprising change took place. The mother went on eating for another minute or two in that overpolite way of hers; then she set her knife and fork down on the table, beside her empty plate, dug into the purse hanging over the back of the chair, took out a box if cigarettes, turned toward me and, with a strange, too-brilliant smile, asked me for a light.

I promptly stood up, lighted her cigarette. The mother thanked me, with a second smile just as brilliant, then added, under the agreeing, approving gaze of her daughter, this totally artificial sentence: "We are very pleased, my daughter and I, to have a person like yourself as our neighbor at table." I hesitated, almost expecting her to invite me to sit with them, but nothing happened. I went back and sat at my own table.

Now once again I asked myself the question: What did Beate's twin want of me? Apparently she wanted what as a rule, in such circumstances, it is men who specially want. But why did she want it? As before, there were two hypotheses: (1) Because she was a Northern European girl who had come down from Germany to Italy, with the not-so-unconscious desire to release her pent-up vitality in the land of sunshine and ardent men. (2) Because Beate, in Naples, had confided in her, had spoken to her about me, and she, impelled by some obscure rivalry, had decided to supplant her sister in my life. But the moment I had formulated them, these two hypotheses, possible but banal, seemed inadequate. For one thing, they didn't explain Trude's im-

patience: she had barely arrived and was already trying to take her sister's place, moreover with a demeanor of which the least that could be said was that it produced an effect contrary to the one intended. Further, there was the mother's behavior, curiously like Müller's toward Beate, that is, at once complaisant and hostile.

The supper ended with a banana, which Trude exploited to repeat, demurely, the mimicry of sexual penetration already performed a little earlier with her finger dipped in the mayonnaise. While she gradually stripped the fruit of its skin and put it slowly, without biting it, into her mouth, Trude never stopped besieging me with lascivious glances that seemed to express, with similar feeling, the almost gastronomical appetite she seemed to feel for my person. She finished eating the banana, dropped the limp and empty skin on the plate, thought for a moment, then bent suddenly toward her mother and began speaking to her in a whisper while giving me some looks, as if to say: I'm talking about you, don't move, wait till I finish. In front of her there was a glass full of wine; as she spoke, she took an occasional long sip, another difference from Beate, whom I had never seen drink anything but water. The argument between the two women was long; apparently Trude was asking something and her mother was refusing. The plea was seductive and the refusal sharp, as sometimes is the case between a stern mother and a spoiled child. Trude spoke, as it were, upward, all bent over the table; the mother listened to her, head down, smoking a meditative cigarette in brief puffs.

Finally the meaning of all this was clarified. The mother suddenly turned toward me and said to me in a cold, distant tone of admonition: "Trude is telling me that you suggested a moonlight stroll to her. Very well. Go along. But I must tell you that I don't trust Italian

men in the least and it really must be a moonlight stroll and nothing more. You Italian men are always ready to lay your hands on a woman. That mustn't happen with Trude. You must remember Trude is a German girl and must be shown due respect."

I was so dumfounded by Trude's nonchalant lie, according to which I had invited her (but when? how?) for a moonlight stroll, that it didn't occur to me to take offence at the mother's haughty tone and racist attitude. For that matter, another thought prevented me from reacting both to Trude's lie and to the mother's scorn: this stroll was, in fact, what I most wanted at this moment. Didn't I have to ask Trude for her sister's address? And besides, as I suddenly thought, in talking with Trude about her sister, wouldn't I be able to learn finally who Beate "really" was?

So I merely pretended I hadn't heard the mother's rude remarks, I stood up, came to the women's table, and said: "I'm ready for our walk. Don't worry, Madame, I am a rather anti-traditional Italian. Not least because I studied and took my degree in Germany."

I hoped, with these words, to allay the mother's hostility; but I was mistaken. She insisted, inflexibile: "You're not a traditional Italian, eh? At least from the way you looked at Trude during supper, I'd say you are, on the contrary."

So, I thought, just as Beate had a jealous husband sticking close to her, Trude was guarded by a hostile mother. I said, with an ironic bow: "You have a very bad opinion of Italians."

"I know you, you're all alike. The first skirt that comes along and you lose your head. In the street, Italian men turn to look at the rear part of women going by. It's indecent. In Germany, this does not happen."

"Every country has its faults and its virtues."

"It's no accident that Casanova was Italian."

"True, but Don Juan was Spanish."

Trude intervened impetuously: "That's enough, Mamma. Don't be so mean to Signor Lucio. Don't judge him until he's been put to the test. Wait. Well, Lucio, shall we go?"

I bowed affirmatively; the two woman got up from the table; the mother said to me, smiling with a strange, sudden cordiality: "Now remember: don't bring her back to me late, because tomorrow morning we have to get up early to go to the Blue Grotto."

Meanwhile, all three of us were leaving the dining room. In the hall, Trude asked her mother: "What are you going to do?"

The mother answered meekly: "I'll go listen to the radio, in the parlor."

"Poor Mamma, I always leave you alone." With these words, Trude flung herself on her mother's neck and kissed her warmly. Then, with no transition, she turned to me, took my hand, and started for the door, saying: "Let's go."

We came out into the garden, and I asked Trude: "Where shall we go for our stroll? Toward the countryside, or the village?"

"Let's go to the village. In the country it's dark, I wouldn't want the traditional Italian to waken in you, in that darkness."

I said, bored: "Why don't we go into the parlor then and keep your mother company?"

"Oh, come on, don't be so touchy! We'll go into the village, all right, but we'll take those lovely little dark lanes. You see? I trust you."

We silently walked down the drive; we turned into a

lane between two dry walls, which, as I knew, led to the square. Following my train of thought, I said: "Why did you tell your mother I had invited you for a moonlight stroll? When, actually, I hadn't invited you at all?"

"Because I had a feeling you would. And besides I wanted to be alone with you."

"Why did you want to be alone with me?"

"What a question! Because you appeal to me."

I remained silent for a moment. Trude's frankness amazed me; not so much by its crudeness, however, as by a certain expectable quality I felt in it: as if she had decided everything long in advance. I asked, cautiously: "I appeal to you why?"

She burst out laughing: "Why does a man appeal to a woman?"

"Hmph, I don't know."

"Think about it."

"To make love."

"That, too. Or rather, I would say: that especially."

I ventured: "To make love right away? Now?"

Curiously, she turned grave, frowned, in sudden reflection: "What a hurry! No, I was speaking—how shall I say?—theoretically."

And so we were already deep in a conversation with an erotic undercurrent. I felt arousal at such an explicit and complete interest and, at the same time, an obscure sense of frustration. Beate had never allowed me to hope for even the lightest caress; this difficulty had fascinated me. Trude's ease, on the contrary, disgusted me, mixed a moralistic judgment with arousal. I might even have been capable of making love with her, but only to confirm for myself once again that she was a poor imitation of Beate. Trying to change the subject, I said:

"Your mother would be amazed to hear you talk like this."

"My mother doesn't know me, like all the mothers in this world, for that matter."

"Does your mother love you or Beate more?"

"Beate and I are so different! She loves us both, but for different reasons."

"What are they?"

"Well, my mother thinks Beate is more cultured, more artistic, more intellectual than me, and loves her for those presumed qualities. Me, she loves, on the other hand, because she considers me more affectionate, more like herself, more like a true daughter should be. And, in particular, more positive, more human than Beate."

"Why did you say 'presumed' qualities?"

"Because my mother isn't a good judge in these matters. She's a woman who believes in traditional values—she comes from an army family, imagine!—she doesn't understand a thing about culture, and so she takes for art and intellectualism what instead is only snobbism, playacting, pseudo-culture."

I looked at her with surprise: "It seems to me you aren't very fond of your sister."

"I was. She was the person I loved most in the world. But when I joined the party, I saw her in a different light. Then everything about her that had once made me admire her became hateful to me."

"For example?"

"I told you: her pseudo culture, her snobbism, her playacting. I realized one thing especially: Beate has a strong destructive tendency."

On hearing these opinions, I felt a sense of unpleasant discovery: I had wanted to know more about the mysterious Beate; there, my wish was granted. I pro-

tested all the same: "Destructive. Isn't that rather a strong word?"

"Judge for yourself. Isn't there something destructive in a person who claims to be superior to other people and then fails in everything she does?"

"Fails?"

"Of course. Beate, when she was nine, thought she had a vocation for the dance. But after five years she gave it up and devoted herself to poetry. She scribbled poems from the age of fourteen to the age of seventeen, then she found she had a talent for painting. But after only two years, lo and behold, she was an actress. Now she acts in basements and provincial theaters, she goes on writing her ugly poems and painting her even uglier pictures. Because Beate's specialty is that she never gives anything up. Instead, she accumulates her failing artistic activities. But what's left of all this, in the end? Nothing. Only pride. You know what she is, Beate, in reality?"

"I couldn't say. Your sister, first of all."

"Unfortunately. But even more, she's something else: an intellectual. Now it's the intellectuals, along with the Jews, who have been the ruination of Germany."

And thus, with a touch of anti-Semitism and anti-intellectualism, the dismaying picture of the difference between Trude and Beate was complete. We had now emerged from the narrow path onto the main road. I stole a glance at Trude: an unusual animation colored her cheeks, made her eyes sparkle; it was obvious that discussion of her twin's character meant a great deal to her. I thought that, after all, her polemical hostility toward Beate didn't outrage me too much because it was chiefly a view not so much different as reductive: where I had seen the metaphysical, hypochondriacal angel of

Dürer's *Melencolia*, she was putting one of the countless little Madame Bovarys that populated Europe, but the despair that was at the root of my relationship with Beate was not altered, still less denied. I asked cautiously: "You said that Beate claims to be superior to others. What did you mean by that?"

"Something very precise, which can be summed up in these words: I joined the party, she didn't. When I say the party, I mean others, namely the German people. What right does Beate have to consider herself superior to those who have cast aside all intellectualism, and have joined the party without reservations, rolling up their sleeves, becoming constructive? She says she hates politics; I'm afraid it's not politics she hates, it's the party. She doesn't say so—I wouldn't let her say it, for that matter—but you can see it, you can sense it, you can almost smell it; it's impossible not to be aware of it."

I couldn't resist the temptation to parrot her: "So you've rolled up your sleeves and become constructive?"

Curiously, she caught the irony: "I used to smile at certain slogans, too, once upon a time. But since I've been in the party, I've discovered that lots of things perhaps could be said better, but in the end they couldn't be said differently. Beate doesn't even know what joining the party means. And so she considers herself superior to me, she scorns me. Now I say this: am I to be scorned because I didn't want to turn into a chronic failure like her?"

"Surely not. But what do you mean by chronic failure?"

"What Beate is; someone who's tried everything, except the one thing that could save her."

"Joining the party, eh?"

She stopped and faced me squarely. "Yes, exactly."

"You know what you're saying?" I said, also facing her. "That the party is made up of chronic failures. That's right, because, according to your own words, Beate, to keep from becoming a chronic failure, should have joined the party. Isn't that so?"

She sensed the trap, and answered: "The party is like a church in which there are those who, so to speak, were already in it when they were outside it; and those who, on the contrary, have to make a great change inside themselves in order to enter. Beate, if she had joined the party, would have belonged to the second category."

I said, walking on: "But you belong to the first. Isn't that so?"

"Let's not talk about me, please."

I insisted, after a moment's silence: "It seems to me that you harbor a great hostility toward your sister."

"I told you before: once she was the person I admired most in the world. Then I opened my eyes. Her histrionics don't fool me any more."

"What made you open your eyes? Joining the party?"

"Not exactly. Joining the party was only the conclusion of a long inner process."

"And what if Beate, after all, were right?"

She answered, calm and convinced: "She can't be right."

"Maybe Beate is looking for the truth. In a search like that, failures are inevitable."

"Beate isn't looking for the truth. She's looking for death. She has a self-destructive tendency that, one of these days, will lead her to suicide."

"But perhaps the truth is, in fact, death. In any case, don't you think you're exaggerating?"

She stopped again in the middle of the road and

looked at me with a hint of a smile. "Did Beate, by any chance, ever talk to you about Kleist and about his double suicide?"

I couldn't help being taken aback. So, what I thought was a secret between me and Beate was, on the contrary, something known, taken for granted, at least to judge by Trude's tone, that tone of ironic indulgence which family members generally use when the conversation turns to a relative's eccentricities. I blurted: "Yes, she did mention something to me about it."

She started laughing, in a cruel and feline manner: "Didn't she perhaps tell you that she's roaming around the world looking for somebody who thinks like Kleist, who'll agree to kill himself with her. Beate, God knows why, identifies herself with Kleist. Unfortunately, she hasn't yet found the person who can play the part of Henriette Vogel; but I'll bet she asked you, too."

"Asked me what?"

"To die with her."

I lied resolutely: "She never asked me anything."

"Didn't she even talk to you about Kleist?"

"I took my degree with a thesis on Kleist and, at the moment, I'm translating a story of his. Yes, we talked about him, but in what you might call academic terms."

She stared at me with a cunning, intolerable look in which there was at once incredulity and irony: "And yet I would have sworn it."

"Why?"

"Because you're the type."

"What type?"

"Aren't you an intellectual? Don't you write, read, think? Aren't you hunting for the truth, too?"

"Well?"

"Well, then, it seems to me very likely that Beate

asked you to commit a nice double suicide with her, à la Kleist!"

I preferred to remain silent because her tone was so sarcastic that it allowed only an equally aggressive reply. We walked a little farther in silence. Then I asked, with irritated curiosity: "Excuse me, but would you mind telling me why you wanted to take this walk with me this evening? I was on my own; if I had foreseen you would say such bad things about someone dear to me, I wouldn't have come."

"And you? Why did you agree to take this walk?"

I wondered if I should tell her that I had agreed in order to get Beate's address. Then, I couldn't say why, I decided that at least for the moment it was best for me not to let Trude know I wanted to join her sister in Germany. I answered: "To tell you the truth, because I wanted to hear you talk about Beate. I don't know her at all; I'd like to know her better."

"I did talk about her, didn't I?"

"Yes, but in what terms!"

There was another silence. Finally, she went on: "As I told you before, Beate, in Naples, talked to me about you."

"And what did she tell you?"

"She told me everything."

"Everything about what?"

"About the two of you."

"The two of us? But we only spoke to each other once."

"I promised Beate to keep it a secret. But perhaps you should know: Beate told me you had made a great impression on her."

"What sort of impression?"

"In other words, Beate has a crush on you."

I was suddenly moved. "Is that really what she said?"

"Yes, she told me she was actually afraid she had fallen in love with you. In other words, between the two of you there was what they call a *coup de foudre*!"

She laughed ambiguously, half sarcastic, half envious. But I was already far from her, far from Capri, far from Italy. I was in a house in Berlin, in the living room where Beate was accustomed to study, listen to music, read. There is a big window, the sort you often see in modern houses. The window overlooks the garden, where I glimpse a single flower bed, an intense green, with a tree in the middle: a large California blue cedar, its branches outstretched like arms, in a gesture of melancholy deprecation. Beate is standing behind the window and looking at the cedar with the same despairing eyes I had seen every evening when she looked at me at Anacapri. What is Beate thinking about? Certainly about the pleasure that wants eternity, according to Nietzsche. That pleasure to which she aspired and which I was incapable of granting her.

I stirred from this sort of daydream, hearing Trude ask: "And you? Are you in love with Beate?"

I decided to be cautious. "I don't know if I'm in love. These are things you always discover afterwards. But, if being in love means feeling ready to commit any madness for the beloved person, then I would say yes, I am."

"Any madness, eh? For example, suicide à la Kleist. Right?"

I don't know why, but I admitted the truth I had denied a short while before: "Even suicide à la Kleist. Yes, but let's not talk about these things. You can't understand them."

Now we were at a particularly deserted, dark stretch of the road. Trude cast a glance around, then came to

me and asked me, lowering her voice: "But did Beate ever give you a kiss? Even just one kiss?"

I looked at her, amazed, sensing a sudden change. I said, upset: "No, between me and Beate there was nothig, not even a kiss."

"Would you like to be kissed by Beate?"

She kept on addressing me as *tu*. It had a singular effect on me, as if I were aware of being observed through powerful binoculars. I answered, also addressing her as *tu*: "What a strange girl you are. Why do you ask me that?"

"Just answer my question. Would you like that or not?"

"Yes, of course. I should say I would."

"Then I will now kiss you; but you imagine you are being kissed by Beate. We look so much alike, Beate and I, that the illusion will be total."

She was speaking in a low voice, her face very close to mine. I said: "Beate never kissed me. How can I compare your kiss to hers?"

"You won't compare it. You'll simply imagine you're being kissed by Beate. Come here."

We were in the middle of the road. Trude thrust me toward a lane in the shadow. Two houses farther along the lane there was a little door, set back in a wall. Trude drew me into this niche and murmured: "Don't make a move. Just leave everything to me"; then, without delay, she flung her arms around my neck. I felt Trude's hand move behind my back, her fingernails dig into my nape. Her mouth approached mine, hovered over it for a moment, as if to mingle her breath with mine, then her lips pressed against mine, moving, at the same time, in a circle and thus creating a little eddy of moist and lascivious flesh from which, more and more, her tireless tongue

emerged. This, I couldn't help thinking, was how all young girls kissed, though some might have more skill or enthusiasm than others. What made Trude's kiss touching and exciting was its very lack of originality. But behind this commonplace amatory technique, I sensed a passion somehow funereal that was individual and regarded only the woman kissing me, who, you would have said, seemed to seek, as in Nietzsche's verse, in the depths of the pleasure of the kiss, the eternity of the void, of oblivion. But here was the point: was this woman Trude? or Beate? I remembered the innocent, flat vulgarity of Trude, and I had no further doubts: Beate was kissing me, it could be no one else. This thought, or rather, this overwhelming sensation, was followed, on my part, by an attempt to complete the illusion through a tighter contact with Trude's body which was, indeed, totally similar to Beate's. I embraced her, my hands grasped the hard, thin hips, drew her abdomen against mine. Then the illusion was truly complete: these were Beate's loins, broad and bony, pressing against mine; it was her pubes, firm and prominent, that, with sudden transport, slammed against mine. And I was already about to murmur: "Beate," almost with the certitude of hearing the answer "Yes, I'm Beate, you're not mistaken," when something absolutely unexpected happened, even if, on reflection, it was expectable.

Just at the moment when the kiss seemed to have reached the peak of intensity, Trude pressed her tongue between her teeth and blew hard, producing, right on my mouth, an obscene, mocking noise. Dismayed and outraged, I drew back violently. Then Trude laughed heartily, pressing her bosom with both hands. I cried, furious: "May I ask what got into you?"

"What got into me was that when I saw you close

your eyes and I realized you had the illusion you were kissing Beate, I felt a terrible jealousy of her and I wanted to destroy your illusion: that's what got into me."

"And you did destroy it, all right. But what you did was ugly. I'm sorry, but it was vulgar."

"But I'm not a refined intellectual. I'm a simple, vulgar girl. Like so many others."

"You're not vulgar. You chose to be vulgar."

She said nothing. And thus, in silence, side by side, we reached the square. The café, as usual, seemed deserted; through the panes I saw only the barman, standing behind his counter. I said, to make peace: "Shall we have something to drink?"

"Why not? Isn't this the café where you paid long-distance court to Beate?"

"How do you know?"

"I told you before: Beate gave me the whole story."

We went inside. Trude asked for an anisette, I ordered a grappa. Trude curtly questioned the barman: "You know me, don't you?"

The barman answered promptly: "I'll say I do. You came here, with a heavy gentleman who had a scar on his cheek."

Trude turned toward me. "You see?" And then she spoke to the man: "You've never seen me before, because I only got here today. You saw my twin sister."

"All the same, I was sure I'd seen you before!"

"You saw my twin sister, I tell you."

At a loss, the barman didn't say a word, but went back to his coffee machine. Trude accepted her glass, raised it in the air: "Let's drink to our health. By the way, will you be drinking to my health or Beate's?"

"To both."

"You're smart. You don't want to get yourself in trouble."

I set the empty glass on the counter and said to the barman: "It's not true about her having a twin sister. She only said it to see if you would believe her."

The barman smiled, embarrassed, perhaps feeling he was being involved in a game that had nothing to do with him. "For me, you're all customers, twins or no twins."

We came out of the café. Trude asked: "Why did you tell the barman I was Beate?"

"I told the truth. The kiss had a strange effect on me; at the very moment you interrupted it, I really had the impression it was Beate kissing me."

"Let's go this way. We'll go back to the pensione along these beautiful little lanes."

But we had taken only a few steps, she in front and me behind, on the brick path between the dry walls, when Trude turned all of a sudden and faced me. "And what if I really am Beate?"

I drew back a little: "You're not Beate. But you'd like me to believe you are."

"Why should I want that? What motive would I have?"

I hesitated a little, then said: "You told me yourself, just now: because I appeal to you. And you rightly believe I want to remain faithful to your sister. You hope that by giving me the illusion you're Beate you can make me be unfaithful."

I was silent another moment, then added: "The curious thing is that, at heart, I would also like to deceive myself into thinking you're Beate."

"Why?"

I answered sincerely: "Well, I won't deny it: Beate would like us to make love and then, immediately afterwards, die together. If I really managed to deceive myself that you're Beate, then I could succeed in making

love without having to hear, immediately afterwards, a proposal to die."

"You're being smart again. And to think that Beate, when she talked to me about you, told me she was convinced she had finally met a man whose despair was equal to hers."

I corrected her, reluctantly: "I am in despair, it's true. But I don't have the same idea as Beate on the subject."

"What's your idea?"

"My idea is that despair should be the natural condition of man. Therefore it's pointless, unnecessary, to arrive at suicide."

From the look she gave me, curiously absent and interrogative, I saw that she didn't understand me. Then she said: "If I went on pretending to be Beate, you wouldn't necessarily succeed in making love. For Beate, love and death are united, not separated. So, as Beate, I would be obliged to reject you."

"And as Trude?"

"Who knows? But you want to remain faithful to Beate. Isn't that right? So it has to be one thing or the other: either you deceive yourself that Trude is Beate and you don't make love; or else you don't deceive yourself and you do. Or rather, you don't, because Trude has no intention of dying."

"But you could keep up the pretense even to the point of pretending suicide."

"How can you pretend suicide? You can only commit suicide in earnest."

And so, in her joking way, she was confronting me with a choice: either deceive myself that she was Beate and keep within the bounds Beate herself had set; or else devote myself to the seduction, actually already taken for granted, of the sister of the woman I loved,

embarking with her on a trivial summer romance. I insisted, nevertheless: "You're right. But, all the same, I would like you to be Beate and yet behave like Trude."

"Aha, you want to eat your cake and have it, too."

Then, suddenly serious, she added: "If you make love with me, you'll be making love with an excellent specimen of the Germanic race, with a healthy girl, clear, honest, straightforward; if, on the contrary, you insist on asking me to pretend to be Beate, you'll find yourself in the grip of a pseudo-artist, a show-off, a decadent intellectual. And, what's more, you'll get nothing on the physical side, because she won't even hear of that, except on the condition you already know."

I said evasively: "Actually, you hate your sister. You came from Naples with the idea of taking her place."

"I don't hate her. But I can't stand histrionics. What are you thinking?"

"I'm not thinking anything."

"You think she really loves you? No, she loves herself disguised as Kleist. You, for her, are simply an ordinary Henriette Vogel, a possible suicide companion, in other words. And she'll act out the suicide farce with you up to a certain point, like all cheap actors."

"Up to what point?"

"Up to death, naturally not hers, but yours. Because, you may not know it, but Beate is a coward, a terrible coward. She talks about death, but she's afraid of it. For that matter, actors don't die: they fall to the stage, yes, but the minute the curtain has come down, they dust off their clothes and go out to supper with the others."

"This is the normal job of the theater."

"In the theater, it's their job; but in life it's histrionics, showing off. You defend Beate, but I know why you defend her."

"Why?"

"Because the idea of suicide excites you sexually. You're another decadent intellectual like Beate; you want me to give you not only the illusion of love but also of death."

"You could give me this illusion only in one way: by asking me, really, to die with you."

" 'Really'? What does 'really' mean?"

"These aren't things that can be explained. They have to be felt. That's all."

She began laughing, a bit cruelly. "It's hard to pretend suicide. But I could try. Who knows? I might succeed."

Now we were at the gate of the pensione, in a darkness almost complete because, in the meanwhile, a cloud had hidden the moon. All of a sudden, in the night, I heard the striking of the clock from the church tower in the village. I stopped to listen, counting the strokes. At that same moment the moon emerged from the cloud and its light revealed a face looking at us, eyes wide, from behind the bars of the gate. It was Trude's mother, who cried: "Hurry up, Trude. There's a long-distance call from Beate, from Munich."

Trude didn't seem excited by her sister's call. "Is Beate already on the line?"

"No, but they said the call would come through in five minutes. Good evening, Signor Lucio. What are you waiting for, then? Run inside!"

"Did she want me especially?"

"Yes, yes. The call's for you!"

The gate opened halfway, Trude entered and ran off, disappearing. Her mother came out, towards me: "Did you have a nice walk?"

"Very nice."

"I bet you talked about Beate."

"Excuse me, but what makes you think that?"

"Being twin sisters is a very peculiar situation. Sometimes they think and feel the same things, sometimes not. And if one undergoes a certain experience, it can happen that the other, at a distance, also experiences it. In other words, twins are sometimes friends, sometimes enemies, sometimes accomplices, and sometimes hostile."

"And what is the case with Trude and Beate?"

"You ask a lot of questions. They told me Italian men were full of initiative, but I didn't know they were also so nosy. Good night. *Arrivederci.*"

On this ambiguously joking note, she turned her back and vanished beyond the gate into the shadows of the drive.

IX

Why, after all, had Kleist killed himself? The question occupied my mind through the entire next morning. It was, for that matter, a less idle question than it might seem. Since Kleist was the model whom, according to Trude, her sister took as inspiration, the first question inevitably prompted a second, which was: did Kleist kill himself for exclusively personal reasons, to which, at a certain point, the other reasons, also surely personal, of Henriette were added, so that in the end their double suicide had actually been the union of two quite separate suicides; or had the two lovers killed themselves for a single reason that regarded them both?

I repeat: the question was not really as idle as it seemed. Practically speaking, Trude was accusing her sister of looking for a man to involve in a fate that actu-

ally regarded only herself. And so, if I had accepted the double suicide, I would have died not because of my own despair but because of Beate's; in other words, though the description might seem incongruous, I would have died to please her. The proof: my despair did not lead to suicide but, as I was now sure, to the stabilization of despair. Only love of Beate could make me change my idea or rather give up my own plan for the plan of the woman I loved.

But this was not certain, either. True, Beate and I had different conceptions of despair; but the fact that I loved Beate and that Beate loved me represented a unique reason to die together, without mental reservations, in the event that Beate's will prevailed over mine. Moreover, I loved Beate and Beate loved me especially because at the base of our love there was the prospect, no matter whether desired or rejected, of double death. This was so much the case that, though I felt attracted to Trude because of her resemblance to her sister, this attraction was limited by the fact that Trude could have imitated her twin in everything save in killing herself with me.

At this point, my reasoning came full circle: after a long pursuit I returned to the point of departure, namely that I, with Trude, could surely deceive myself that I was loving Beate; but at the end of the illusion there was the double suicide, that is to say the very thing that could neither be imitated nor simulated and that, finally, would destroy the illusion itself. So I might as well have a fling with Trude, to see if it was possible for me, through Trude, to have a romance with Beate, but without concluding in double suicide. Kleist was not my model; I wasn't German; against unrestrained Germanic romanticism, it seemed to me I should stick to wise, even if dreary, Mediterranean stoicism.

I thought about these things more as possible, credible

hypotheses than as plans. In the end I concluded that I should remain faithful to Beate, for the banal reason that I loved her and I didn't love Trude. Besides, if I betrayed her with her sister, even if it was to deceive myself that I was making love with her, how would I then have the nerve to face her in Germany? In the presence of the flesh-and-blood Beate, the sophisms inspired by the twins' resemblance would have been revealed for what they were: quibbling excuses to carry out an easy conquest.

I spent my day in the usual beach activities. The two women, that morning, had gone to the Blue Grotto; I had a twinge of anguish at the thought that for the whole day I wouldn't see Trude and so I wouldn't be able to deceive myself that I was loving Beate through her; but I dismissed this, saying that, after all, it was only for one day. Mother and daughter would surely come down that same evening to the dining room.

But, on the contrary, they didn't appear. Their table remained empty, in the dismal way characteristic of pensiones: the two rolled-up napkins set on the empty cloth, the bottles of wine and mineral water partially, unequally consumed. I ate with my eyes glued to the chair on which, at a distance of a few days, the two sisters had sat, one after the other. Now absence united them and mingled them. Which of the two ghosts was looking at me, invisible and yet real, from that empty chair? Beate's? Or Trude's? At times, it seemed I was being looked at by two grim, unhappy eyes; at times, by the same eyes sparkling with animal joy. Now the ghost didn't touch food; now she gobbled, her head down. Beate shook her head to tell me that between us there could not be love without death; Trude stuck her finger, penis-like, into her mouth to tell me that I could make love with her at any time, whenever I wanted.

After supper, I took the usual evening walk and I realized my solitude was oppressing me. Again I felt a sharp desire to look at Trude to see Beate. Again, too, I had the very distinct sensation that Beate was the only woman I had ever loved in my life, and the only one that had loved me. But I couldn't go on toying with the illusion of loving Beate through Trude. I had to procure the address and leave as soon as possible for Germany.

The next day I went down early in the morning to the Piccola Marina and since it was so early I sat down, without undressing, in a deck chair, on the terrace of the establishment. I had brought the volume of Kleist letters with me; I began reading it. All of a sudden, two hands covered my eyes; Trude's voice said, with an unmistakable ring of joy: "Guess who?"

I answered: "Trude."

"You're wrong. My name isn't Trude. My name is—and I am a certain—Beate."

And so, as I couldn't help thinking, the game continued, consisting of exploiting the resemblance to create the illusion. I reacted with impatience; I seized the two hands blinding me, lifted them from my eyes, forced Trude to come around the chair. I said to her at once: "Enough of these games. Give me Beate's address in Germany."

"What do you want to do with the address?"

"I want to go there and see her. I'll leave as soon as possible, perhaps tomorrow. What is her address, then?"

She looked at me with strangely contemplative eyes, as if studying me. In the end, she said: "I won't give you the address."

"Why don't you want to give it to me?"

She answered, with naturalness: "Because I don't want you to leave."

"But I want to see Beate."

With a slightly pleading tone, she said: "Stay here and be satisfied with me, since I look so much like her. Then when we leave, you can leave with us and we'll go see Beate together in Germany."

It was a reasonable and acceptable proposal; but I was struck by the fact that I didn't feel, at this proposal, the impatience of a man who wants, at all costs, to see again the woman he loves. Or rather, I did feel that impatience but only for one moment; immediately afterwards, Trude's strange remark to the effect that I should "be satisfied" with her, while waiting to see Beate again, recalled her with the stirring of a tempting, incredulous curiosity. I asked: "How far could you go in satisfying me?"

"As far as you want."

"In every way?"

"Yes."

What did she mean? That in order to make love with me, she was prepared to carry the fiction as far as suicide? Strangely, as I looked into her beautiful green eyes, so similar to Beate's, I felt that at heart I didn't want to know exactly what she had meant by that ambiguous word "satisfied." Falling back on ambiguity myself, I said: "If you want me to stay, first of all you must give me the address. Then we'll see."

"What will we see?"

"I don't want to drop in on Beate without letting her know first. If you give me the address, I want at least to write her, to describe my plan."

"What is your plan?"

I answered with certitude, almost with violence: "To propose that she live with me, here in Italy, far from Kleist's homeland."

"Ah, so that's it? And what do you think? Will she accept?"

"I don't know. What do you think?"

"She won't accept. She's too attached to her husband, and also to Kleist."

"We'll see. Meanwhile, give me her address."

For a moment she looked at me in silence, then she said: "I'll give you the address if you promise me you'll stay here and leave for Germany with us."

"How much longer do you plan to stay here?"

"A week."

I made a quick calculation. A week would soon pass. I would exploit it to extract from Trude as much information about Beate as possible. Furthermore, I shouldn't turn Trude against me; if I wanted to see Beate again in Germany, without her husband's knowing, it was best for me to make an accomplice of Trude. I said: "All right; I promise you I'll wait a week."

She clapped her hands in sincere, childish joy; she flung her arms around my neck, kissed me on both cheeks. Then she cried: "Bravo. Now I'll write the address for you this minute in your book here," and on the spot, she took a pen from her bag, grabbed the volume of Kleist's letters that I held on my lap, and opened it to the first pages. She immediately exclaimed in surprise: "Why, this is a book I gave Beate. How do you happen to have it now?"

I answered ambiguously: "Are you so amazed that I should have it?"

"In a way, yes."

"Why?"

"Because this book was something very intimate, actually secret, between me and her."

"Then, look here: this is why she gave it to me. Look at this letter that's underlined," and I showed her the letter in which Henriette Vogel announces her own death and Kleist's. Trude read the letter carefully, then

she shook her head and put her forefinger to her temple, with the gesture that is usually made to indicate madness: "Always Kleist! Always Kleist! But what does Kleist have to do with her? A great writer, who died over a century ago, what connection does he have with a dilettante, a histrionic show-off like my sister? Wait: I'll write the address for you."

She bent her great head of red hair, carefully wrote the address, and handed me the book again. I said: "I wanted to send this book back to her. But now, I'll deliver it to her in person, in a week's time, in Germany."

In a tone of faint contempt, she said: "As far as that goes, you don't even have to give it back to her. Don't worry: she has another copy."

Then she stood up. "But that's enough of Beate. How about going out in a boat for a bit? What do you say? We can have a swim in some grotto, then come back to the Marina and eat, it's so beautiful here."

She was proposing a ready-made program to me, her eyes, shining with happy impatience. I answered in a forced carefree tone: "It seems unquestionably a good idea to me."

"Let's go then. Where's your cabin?"

"Don't you have a cabin? Isn't your mother with you?"

"She stayed at the pensione, or rather, I made her stay. She wanted to come too, but I told her I wanted to be alone with you. Come on, let's go and undress in your cabin."

I stood up, I preceded her toward the platform. At that morning hour, there was no one on it yet. I walked to my cabin, opened the door, and said: "You go in first, then I'll go in, after you've finished." She looked at the open door; suddenly a wicked glint sparkled in her eyes.

"I have an idea: there's nobody around, and anyway they'll think we're husband and wife. Come in with me, and we'll undress together."

I thought that the day's programs was still proceeding with inflexible regularity, and I protested, overcome by some vague distrust: "But we're *not* husband and wife. And anyway, what if your mother found out?"

"My mother will find out; I'll tell her myself."

"But there isn't room for two in the cabin."

"Oh, come on, are you afraid to undress in front of me?"

"No, but . . ."

She was standing at the door; all at once she stepped backwards into the cabin and, at the same time, gamine-like, she winked at me. Then, without saying a word, I went into the cabin and shut the door.

Now we were cramped in the narrow space of the cabin, in a good smell of wood impregnated with brine and warmed by the sun; but I felt more bewildered than aroused. I was wondering why Trude had wanted to come into the cabin with me; I suspected a motive apart from her flirtatiousness, singular and bold as it was. But what? I couldn't manage to define it. Meanwhile, in the course of these reflections, I took off my polo shirt, pulling it over my head. As I emerged from it, my torso bare, I saw that Trude, still dressed, was watching me from her corner. I said: "By the way, who's going to undress now? There's only one towel to cover yourself with: who'll use it first?"

She answered at once: "You undress first."

She hesitated, then added in quite an unexpected way, without coyness or seduction: "If you like, you can forget about the towel. You won't be the first man I've seen naked. We Germans don't have the taboo about nudity

that you Italians have. For that matter, a year ago I stayed in a nudist camp on the North Sea."

Her objective indifference was convincing. But, all the same, in the explanation, I sensed something obscurely but unquestionably specious. I ventured: "In that case, I suggest we undress together, at the same moment. No towel. After all, we came into the cabin to look at each other: where's the harm in that? I'll look at you, and you'll look at me. What do you say?"

She protested at once, offensively: "If you were German, I'd accept; but I know you Italian men. No, no, I don't want you to look at me while I undress. I'd only do it if we were lovers. But we aren't and you're Italian."

Irked, I asked: "May I ask then why you wanted us to come in here together?"

She shrugged. "Just because. To save time."

With sudden and spiteful defiance, I said: "Well, I'm exactly that kind of Italian man who likes to look at women. And I came into the cabin with the specific idea of seeing if you're different from Beate. Not the face—I can see that's identical—but the body."

To my surprise, Trude wasn't shocked or insulted. Instead, she asked with curiosity: "How will you be able to tell if my body is different from Beate's? You haven't seen her naked, after all."

"Of course, I have. Her husband is so proud of her beauty that, one day, on a lonely beach, he made her allow me to photograph her, completely naked."

"Really? And what did you think?"

"I thought that Beate is very beautiful. And that her husband is very much in love with her."

"That's the truth. He's crazy about her." She was quiet for a moment, then she said, in a practical and resigned tone: "All right, if it means so much to you, I'll undress in your presence. I'll pretend you're German

and you're looking at me specifically to see if I'm like Beate. But, at the same time, you have to undress, too."

So she was insisting on her plan: she wanted to see me naked even at the price of displaying herself naked as well. Again her insistence seemed specious; I said, in a decisive tone; "No, we won't do any of this. I only wanted to test you; you were excellent; all's well. Now I'm going outside, you put on your suit; and when you come out, I'll come in again."

"You're the first man I've ever met in my life who doesn't want to show himself naked."

"Well, so it goes. Maybe the Italians are voyeurs. But it's very unusual for them to be exhibitionists."

Strangely, my voice was charged with patriotic pride; although I realized perfectly well that my indignation had a different motive. In her turn equally false, Trude became enraged: "You're ashamed to show yourself naked because you're an Italian, full of prejudices. For us Germans, nakedness is something healthy, clean, true. But I'm not afraid of being looked at, like you. Go ahead and look at me: see if I'm the same as Beate."

With this, she tore off her dress with angry, violent movements, tugging it over her head. Without surprise, I saw that she wasn't wearing anything under the dress, probably in order to be able to strip quickly, anywhere, for a swim. Completely naked, heedless of me, as if I weren't there, she yanked her bathing suit out of her bag and bent down to pull it on, stepping into it first. All of this without ever stopping and allowing herself to be observed; exactly as you behave when you're alone. She finished pulling on the suit, straightened up; she said in an ironic, cutting tone: "How am I then? More or less red than Beate? More or less curly?" I shrugged and went out of the cabin.

She didn't keep me waiting long. In a little while she

came out, calm and serene, and said: "I'm ready, put your suit on, and let's go." I didn't say anything, I put on my trunks in great haste. Ten minutes later we were already out of the little bay of Le Sirene, in the open sea.

The water was choppier than it had seemed to me when I was looking at it from the beach. Trude, huddled at the prow, her hands gripping the sides, her legs crossed, bobbed up and down with the waves, against the background of the great red cliff of Capri; and, though I was rowing hard, I couldn't help looking at the way her thin thighs, of a milky whiteness dotted here and there with red, were crossed woodenly below the concave abdomen. In the same way I had seen Beate seated at the prow of the boat with her husband; and similarly she must have appeared to the eyes of her enamored spouse. As if to suppress this memory of her on the boat, an image which linked me with Müller, I suddenly asked: "Would it irritate you if I asked you some questions about Beate?"

"Why should it irritate me? Ask all the questions you want."

"Then I'd like to know exactly what she told you about me, when you met her in Naples."

She looked at me with a crafty expression, as if sizing me up: "She was afraid, because she didn't want you to end up like a certain pianist, who had been her lover before her marriage."

"Now where does this pianist come in?"

"He comes in because he was Jewish."

"What of it?"

She was silent for a moment, then she made up her mind and said: "Beate doesn't want to have anything more to do with Jews. Too much trouble. So before getting involved in a love story, she wants to be sure that the man's an Aryan."

I felt an incredulous, indignant surprise, as if at an unjustified, gratuitous slander. I cried: "It seems to me impossible that Beate would take such precautions: you were the one who prompted her."

"No, that's what she thought, and she told me. To tell you the truth, the minute I saw you yesterday evening, I also thought you might be Jewish."

"What makes you think that?"

"First of all, you're an intellectual, and almost all intellectuals, at least in Germany, are Jews; and then because you look like one."

"How do I look like one?"

"You're dark, you're not very tall, you have black eyes, curly hair . . ."

"But most Italians look that way."

"And besides, it's not a question of guessing. It's a question of being sure."

"Sure of what?"

"Sure you're dealing with a person you can trust."

She was silent for a moment, then added: "Obviously for Beate the fact that you are or aren't Jewish doesn't have the same kind of importance it has for me. Beate doesn't belong to the party."

I asked sharply: "Let's assume for a moment that I'm Jewish: what would you do then?"

"I'd ask you to take me back to the beach."

I looked at her closely to see if she was serious. Yes, she was serious. Her face had somehow hardened, while still retaining its childish expression. I said: "Beate wouldn't behave this way."

"Beate and I are two different people, I've already told you that."

I said coldly: "Very well, let's go back," and, without another word, I began pulling on the oars, to turn the boat around.

She became visibly alarmed: "Well, are you a Jew or aren't you?"

I answered: "I've been to Germany quite recently; I know this situation. If someone asks me that question, maybe I tell the truth, namely that I'm not Jewish, but then I prefer to have nothing further to do with the person."

I was silent a moment, then I resumed: "I'll leave tomorrow for Germany; I'll go and see Beate. She won't ask me these questions."

She studied me, as if undecided and puzzled. Then she said: "I don't want you to leave; you promised me you'd leave in a week's time, with us. If you're not Jewish, what does it cost you to prove it? You say you know Germany. Then you must know that the Führer forbids us to have anything to do with Jews; and I want to be with you. What do you care? I'm not asking anything special: just for you to reassure me."

I stopped rowing, and asked: "What do you want of me anyway?"

"I want you to give me the proof that you're not Jewish."

"What proof?"

She cried, with a sincere and naïve tone of pique: "Just now, I tried in every way to get that proof. But you took care not to give it to me."

I was frankly dumfounded: "Where?"

"In the cabin. I suggested we undress together because I wanted to see if you're circumcised. But you wouldn't let me see anything."

An enormous amazement overcame me. So that strange, troubling proposal of reciprocal exhibitionism had been basically only a bureaucratic request for me to show my racial documents and prove they were in order.

I cried: "Ah, so that's it! Now I understand why you wanted to see me naked. So that's what you want, is it? For me to show you my member?"

Seriously and politely, just like a doctor answering a patient who's asked if he has to undress, she said: "Yes, if you don't mind."

I made a very rapid calculation. If, as I was tempted to do, I refused to supply the proof and accompanied Trude to the shore, it seemed to me inevitable that afterwards I would have to break with her completely; and, in consequence, later, also with Beate: the two sisters couldn't be totally separated one from the other. So, I could only make the best of it and to display my racial certificate to Trude, the way you show your passport to a border gendarme. But I was still curious about one last thing, or rather, I still felt an attraction similar to the kind that can come to someone looking into a deep abyss and trying to measure its depth with his gaze: how could anyone ask what Trude was asking me? How could anyone arrive at such a request? I enquired in a tone of affectionate melancholy: "Are you really sure you want this proof?"

A wave struck the boat, at the prow. Trude was lifted up, up, and then, the moment she came down again, she said: "I am certainly sure I love my country. So, as my country wants me to want this proof, I am asking it of you: that's all."

I insisted: "Does a person have to love his country always and under any circumstances?"

"I would say yes."

I was silent a moment, as I went on rowing. Then I resumed: "But I'm not German; my country, at least for the present, doesn't ask certain things."

"Yes, I know you're not German."

"And besides, after all, why should I supply this proof?"

"I told you: to reassure me."

"But what for? I love Beate, not you; and Beate isn't asking any proof of me. Between you and me there is nothing, there can be nothing: why the proof, then?"

I spoke without looking at her, my eyes staring at the bottom of the boat. After a brief silence, I heard her voice say, almost humbly: "You're right; let's go back to shore," and then I raised my eyes.

I was struck by the changed expression of her face. She was huddled down as before, on the seat at the prow; she stared at me with eyes that seemed annihilated by a sudden anguish. The same desperate and helpless anguish that, from my table, I had read every evening, for so many days, in Beate's eyes. Now, she was no longer Trude; it was Beate, really her, despite that absurd request for the proof that Beate would never have asked and that, precisely, because Beate would never have asked it, upset me like a sudden declaration of love. Well, I said to myself, it was Trude who was asking to see my member; but it was Beate who would see it. This may seem a subtle distinction, but, obviously, it wasn't so for my desire, always present, always in ambush. I asked softly, in a subdued voice: "Then you really want it?"

I saw her nod her head: it was again Beate, not Trude, who was making that movement of assent; and in fact now I felt the request no longer as an absurd bureaucratic demand, but as flattery, a mysterious erotic curiosity. I raised both hands to my waist, stretched the elastic band, and slowly pulled the trunks down my legs. I said in a low voice, my head bowed, looking at my abdomen: "Here's the document you were asking me.

As you see, my papers are in order. But you should have spared me this proof." And I started to put everything back inside the trunks. Then I heard Trude's voice, pleading: "No, please. Stay like that. Just another minute."

"Why?"

"It's so beautiful: the sea, the wind, the sun, the cliffs, and you, in the midst of all this, desiring me."

"I desire Beate, not you."

"I know, but it's beautiful all the same."

I said, with sudden anger: "It's not beautiful; it's despicable."

"Why is it despicable?"

I reflected a moment and, then, calmly, I explained: "Because it's despicable to lie to oneself in order to please someone else." I was about to add, once again: "Beate wouldn't have made me do it," but I bit my lip: Beate, when she had urged me with her eyes to reply to Müller's Fascist salute, in reality had asked me to do something equally despicable, if not more so.

There was a moment of silence. I was still looking at my groin and not seeing her. Then I heard her voice again: "In that case, imagine that I'm Beate and I asked you for the proof because I want to make love with you."

"Beate doesn't want to make love with me."

"Who knows? Shall we try?"

How sweet her voice was; with the complaisant and provocative sweetness of a desire fed on another's desire. I felt all of a sudden a great anger toward myself; or rather, toward the part of my body that was opposing its own indiscriminate excitement to the truth of love. I cried: "You're not Beate. You can't understand what Beate is for me, you've never known despair, you've

never wished to die, you've never felt horror at life. You're only a commonplace northern girl who's descended on Capri with the desire for a cheap summer affair."

She started laughing, not the least insulted. Pointing to my now-erect member, she said: "That thing down there doesn't share your opinion, however," and then, seeing that I was about to pull my trunks up again: "No, don't cover it, I like to look at it so much. Now, listen to my suggestion. You love Beate. All right; I don't want you to be unfaithful to her. But I've got a great yearning to make love, maybe because of this sun and this sea. So we'll do this: you won't cover yourself, just stretch out your foot. You don't have to do anything. Just your foot."

"What are you going to do?"

"You'll see."

She looked at me with a grave and imperious manner; as if for her it had been a reasonable and justified request. Mechanically I raised my right leg, stretched my foot out toward her. Trude took the foot in both her hands and, holding it by the ankle and by the tip, she began moving it slowly up and down between her legs. Under the sole I felt her soft, yet resilient, elastic sex spreading, moving here and there like the fleshy, elusive folds of a sea animal clinging to a rock, in a current that, though without tearing it away, gently and unceasingly buffeted it. I raised my eyes and looked at her. Her head was tilted toward one shoulder, and her eyes were half closed; every now and then her sharp, pink tongue darted from her lips, as if driven by a mysterious and, somehow, mocking mechanism. This movement of my foot, guided by her hands up and down against her sex, lasted a long time. Then Trude heaved a deep sigh and,

in a spasmodic relaxation of her whole body, she slipped from the seat onto the bottom of the boat. This didn't mean she let go of my foot, which now she clasped to her bosom like a precious treasure. All of a sudden I became aware of the silence and then I heard, very near, the backwash of the waves against the rocks: during our lovemaking the boat had been allowed to drift and now was only a short distance from a little promontory. I hastily grabbed the oars and, leaving my foot still in Trude's hands, with a few strokes I pulled the boat away from the rocks. Then I again shipped the oars and looked at Trude. As our eyes met, she said immediately: "Again."

And so I had to let her pull herself up on the seat once more and replace my foot in her lap, as it had been a little earlier. Everything was repeated: the closed eyes, the darting tongue, the sigh, the slide to the bottom of the boat. In the end, after remaining motionless for a little while, as if savoring her pleasure, Trude got up and resumed her seat at the prow. I pulled up my trunks, and grabbed the oars again. She asked me, satisfied and ironic: "Well then, who was I for you, as you were stroking me? Trude or Beate?"

"Beate didn't want to be stroked like that."

"Are you so sure? Beautiful souls of the Beate type have terrific appetites."

From the bag she took a white rubber cap, pulled it on her head, stuffing the rebellious locks of hair under it; then she said: "I'm going to have a swim." Quickly she climbed onto the prow and dived into the sea.

I stayed in the boat, my hands on the oars, watching her swim nearby. The waves, rather rough and in great disorder, seemed not to touch her, the movements of her arms were so confident and agile as she slipped be-

tween one wave and the next like a long, glistening black fish with a white head. She circled the boat, then pulled herself up with one yank of her arms, as far as her chest, gave her body a second thrust, and landed in the boat. And now, there she was, the glistening suit glued to her body, sitting again at the prow. Pulling off the cap and shaking her head to expel the water from her ears, she said: "Now let's go eat. I'm dying of hunger. I want to eat and eat and eat, all the good things of the Italian cuisine. I don't want to talk any more about Beate and her complications until I've eaten my fill."

X

Trude was telling the truth when she cried she was dying of hunger. Once at table, on the terrace of the beach restaurant, she proved her hunger wasn't only a boast, inspired perhaps by her rivalry with her sister, who was frugal to the point of fasting. She ate a lot and, what struck me even more, she ate the same course twice, just as in the boat she had wanted to make love twice. Thus I watched her devour two first courses (a mussel soup and spaghetti with clam sauce), two second courses (a lobster and some red mullet), two side dishes (salad and fried potatoes), two desserts (an ice and a piece of cake). Along with this double quantity of food, Trude consumed an appropriate amount of wine: I kept refilling her glass, so in a short time, she indicated, with a certain exaggeration of gestures and words, that she was drunk.

For my part, I felt once again that I was in the distressing and for me familiar mood of despair at not being in despair. That is to say: despair lurked in the depths of my spirit, as always; but this didn't prevent my enjoying the lovely day, the magnificent landscape, the good food, and naturally Trude's unripe and ambiguous beauty. Was this perhaps the so-called stabilization I had been pursuing for such a long time? A stabile, normal despair that allowed me to enjoy life, indeed to enjoy it more than ever, since I no longer hoped for anything? But didn't all this risk lead me not to stabilization but to a kind of hypocrisy? To suffer despair and, at the same time, eat and drink heartily, make love without remorse, and feel lyrical rapture in nature?

Perhaps to dismiss this irksome reflection, I chose to think of Beate; and again I saw her, with the eyes of my imagination, in the living room of her house in Germany, gazing dreamily at the tree outside in the garden. I asked Trude, suddenly: "In Beate's house, in Berlin, isn't there a big window in the living room that overlooks the garden, and outside, in the garden, isn't there perhaps a big tree?"

Trude started laughing, a bit raucously: "You really can't stay very long without talking about Beate. All right, I've finished eating; so let's talk about her. You're right, in the living room there's a big window which overlooks the garden, and in the garden there's a big California cedar. But how did you know that?"

"Many modern German houses have such windows overlooking gardens. Is Beate's house large?"

"Yes, rather. A two-story villa."

"Where is Beate's room? I mean, where does she sleep?"

"She sleeps with Alois, in a bedroom on the second floor."

"Who's Alois?"

"I thought you knew his name. Müller, her husband."

"They sleep together? I mean, in the same bed?"

"Obviously."

"But Beate, in the few words we exchanged, led me to believe her husband revolts her."

"In fact, she doesn't allow him to touch her."

"In one bed, it's difficult, if not impossible, to sleep together and not touch each other."

She looked at me, with a malicious glint in her eyes, then said: "All right, we'll talk about Beate. But you have to tell me what you really want to know. What do you care if, in sleep, Alois's hand slips between Beate's legs? This isn't what's important, is it?"

I answered, angrily: "Very well: I want to know why Beate agreed to become the wife of Alois."

She was silent a moment, as if pondering, then she asked: "You want me to talk first about myself or first about Beate?"

"Which do you prefer?"

"Answer me. Must I speak first of me or of her."

"First of Beate."

She was silent again for a moment, then went on: "Everything comes from what I call Beate's histrionics, her irresistible tendency to see herself as the heroine of a novel or a play and therefore to behave like one. When she was only fifteen, Beate was already harboring the idea of the Kleist double suicide, with a classmate whose name was Rudolph. In the end, they decided they would make love, then close the shutters, and turn on the gas. They wanted to be found naked on the bed, in each other's arms, with lots of flowers in the room and, prominently displayed on the table, a letter addressed to Rudolph's mother, copied word for word from the one Henriette Vogel wrote before killing herself with Kleist.

But it so happened that Rudolph's mother came back from the country ahead of schedule, found them naked in bed, didn't notice the letter or the gas that had just begun to come from the stove, and instead made a moralizing scene, saying it was a scandal for two children to make love, that her son had to think of his studies, and other things along that line. As the scene continued, Beate furtively grabbed the letter, gathered her clothes under her arm, ran from the room, passed the kitchen and turned off the gas, got dressed in the hall, and cleared out.

"In spite of this fiasco, Beate didn't stop thinking of Kleist and his double suicide. For her the unsuccessful attempt was simply a way of getting used to the idea of dying with someone. Two years later, at seventeen, she thought she had found the suitable partner in a young writer for the theater, Sebastian by name, who, however, had apparently taken as his model not Kleist but Dostoevsky, or rather a Dostoevsky character in *The Possessed*, who kills himself for philosophical reasons. Beate easily came to an agreement with Sebastian because she didn't care that much whether the model was actually Kleist so long as the whole affair was steeped in a literary atmosphere. What could be more literary than to mix two writers like Kleist and Dostoevsky? So they decided to kill themselves together in a double suicide, but with two separate models. This time, Beate chose a pistol which, for that matter, was the weapon both in Kleist's suicide and the Dostoevsky one. But a few days before the suicide, Sebastian confided his decision to a friend, one Gottfried; and he, in a moment when the couple was out, on some pretext got into the room in the pension where Sebastian lived, sought and found the pistol, removed the loader, pocketed it, and

went off. Now you can imagine what happened two days later when Sebastian and Beate prepared to kill themselves. The two of them on the bed, after having made love and drunk a great deal of bad German cognac; Sebastian takes the pistol from the bedside table; the last kiss; Sebastian puts the pistol to Beate's temple, because it had been decided that she would die first; Sebastian's finger presses the trigger and . . . a sharp little click as the pistol misses fire. Naturally, Sebastian tried to fire a second time but with the same result. Then he looked at the pistol, saw it was unloaded, and cried: 'It must have been Gottfried.' But Beate, unnerved by this second failure to commit suicide, attacked him, saying to his face, that he had been frightened of death and had been the one to unload the pistol in advance; Sebastian protested; Beate repeated the charge; in the end the suicide à la Kleist degenerated into a vulgar brawl. Beate quickly dressed, left the pension, and refused to see Sebastian again."

At this point I remarked: "You are constantly talking about Beate's histrionics, her showing off. But where are there any histrionics here? It seems to me that in both attempts Beate meant what she was doing. She really did want to die; only chance prevented her. Show-offs, on the contrary, never mean anything; they always have some escape route in reserve."

She immediately protested, with violence: "You're wrong. Infatuated with the part he plays, the show-off is capable of doing anything. It's a matter of the spirit. Even though he acts seriously, he can't help indulging in histrionics."

She was silent a moment, then went on: "Now we come to the third suicide attempt. This time she picked a Jewish pianist, a man who was even more of a failure

than she was, if possible. A failure as a pianist, because he was mediocre; a failure as a husband, because he had separated from his wife. Wasn't he the ideal candidate for an attempt at a Kleist-style suicide?"

I objected: "Kleist certainly wasn't a failure: he was a great writer!"

She answered, smiling: "That's where the histrionics come in: to be Beate Müller and to take yourself for Heinrich von Kleist."

I asked: "Anyway, what happened with the Jewish pianist?"

"What happened was that Beate was determined, even in her histrionics, really to kill herself while the pianist hemmed and hawed."

"Why did he hem and haw?"

"Because he was afraid, I mean, because basically he was less of a fake than Beate and therefore less courageous. In reality, he wasn't in despair for literary reasons, like Beate; he was in despair because he was a German Jew. Which is a serious reason for killing yourself in Germany, but not as serious as the mania for imitating Kleist. In other words, even though he was a Jew, he still had a glimmer of hope; whereas Beate didn't have that glimmer, or at least she was convinced she didn't have it. He and Beate dragged out their suicide plan for several months. Finally, Emil—that was the pianist's name—learned that for racial reasons a contract of his had been cancelled and so he decided to carry it out."

"In what way?"

"In the worst possible way: hanging himself with the curtain rope, in the rented room where he lived. Beate would help Emil tie the rope around his neck, climb onto the stool, and remove the stool from beneath his feet. Then she would provide for herself in the same fashion.

But the rented room where they lived was in an old pre-war apartment house; the curtain rod was decrepit; Emil was a heavyset man; the curtain crashed down; Emil fell heavily to the floor and broke his arm."

"A tragicomic suicide!"

"Wasn't it? Like everything that happens to Beate, for that matter. Then, giving up her suicide for the moment, Beate helped Emil leave the apartment, made him get into her car, drove him to a private clinic where they put his arm in a cast. Then she left the clinic and went straight to the man who is now her husband, Alois Müller. You see, Alois was an important man in the party and Beate knew he was madly in love with her. So she made the following proposal to him: 'I've been informed that Emil is about to be arrested by the police. You allow him to escape abroad; and I give you my word of honor that the day he crosses the border, I'll marry you.' "

"Listen," I cried, "if Alois was so madly in love, wouldn't it have been enough for Beate to go to bed with him, just once, without marrying him?"

"Oh, no. That's exactly what Beate didn't want: to go to bed with Alois. Marry him, yes; make love, no. And, in fact, she didn't hide it from him: I'll marry you, but you won't touch me, not even with your fingertips."

"And what did he do?"

"Naturally, he accepted, with joy."

I said: "After all, in this whole story, Beate comes off magnificently. She tried to kill herself in earnest; she married a man she didn't love to save another that she did love."

"That's the point: Beate didn't love Emil. Imagine! When the curtain rod collapsed and he, so heavyset, fell to the floor with an amazed look on his face, she couldn't

help bursting out laughing. She saw Emil in all his mediocrity; only, as usual, she wanted to play the part of the heroine. I mean, once again, her behavior was dictated by histrionics."

"For you, whatever Beate does, it's always histrionics."

"You can seriously think about suicide only when you are histrionic to the depths of your spirit."

"Ah, so that's it; according to you, all suicides are being histrionic?"

"Yes, of course."

"Then, Kleist, too?"

"Probably, yes. When he wrote, no; but when he killed himself, yes."

I said angrily: "In any case, I beg you not to speak ill of Beate like this. It's more than I can bear."

She laughed. "But it's the facts that speak ill of her. In any case, to go on with the Emil story: he got his passport and left for Paris; Alois and Beate were married the next day. That same night, or rather at two in the morning, someone starts knocking on my door, so violently it seems he wants to break it down. I go and open: it's Alois. Put yourself in my place: he was my brother-in-law, Beate was his wife, I knew nothing of their agreement; I was expecting anything but to see him turn up at my house the night after the wedding. Without a word, he grabs me by the hair, pulls me with terrible strength across the apartment, slams me against a wall and orders me to pull up my skirt; I'm not to speak, I'm not to do anything, just show him my sex, which is red, exactly like Beate's. Frightened by his violence, I obey him. He sits astride a chair, his arms hugging the back, and fixes his eyes intently on that triangle of reddish hair that, for him, obviously, is the symbol of everything he loves and can't have from Beate. This contemplation of his seems comical to me, I can't help laughing. Then, with

sudden fury, he hurls himself on me, tries to release on my body the desire that Beate has refused to satisfy. But I react, I struggle; only after a long struggle he overpowers me. With my furious resistance, I was completing the physical and psychological resemblance to Beate, I was giving him the illusion of facing not me, but Beate, who . . ."

I completed the sentence, in a whisper: ". . . was horrified by him because his hands were stained with blood."

Calmly, she corrected me: ". . . whom she had married on the condition that she wouldn't be touched by him. And, in fact, in the very moment when he succeeds in bending me to his will, there, in a gasping voice, he calls me Beate. And I know for sure that from now on it will always have to be like this, if I want our strange affair to continue: blows, struggle, rape, and the name of Beate sobbed on my mouth, amid the convulsions of his orgasm."

I said, amazed: "If you want the affair to continue? What does that mean? What affair?"

She looked at me, equally amazed, it seemed, that I knew nothing of the situation concealed behind her words, though in reality she hadn't told me about it. Then she cried, in a naïve tone: "Oh, you're right, of course. I forgot to tell you: even before he knew Beate, Alois had been my lover. Beate, by making him marry her, had stolen him from me. That night, in my turn, I stole him back from Beate." She was again silent a moment and then, scrupulously, she added: "It's also true that he came back to me only because I look like Beate. But, after all, it's me he makes love with, not Beate."

She held out her hand, started to pick up her glass. I blocked it, grasping her wrist hard: "Stop drinking. Before long you'll be completely fuddled."

"Ouch, that hurts. Why are you so angry?"

"I'm not angry."

"Yes, you're angry. And I'll tell you why: you don't like to resemble Alois. But you do, all the same: you're both trying to deceive yourselves. You're here with me because you would like to be with Beate. Isn't that strange?"

Her drunkenness made her eyes shift from slyness to dreaminess and then to gravity. I asked: "What makes you think that, with you, I'm behaving like Alois?"

She began to laugh: "It annoys you to be taken for somebody else! And especially if this somebody else is Alois! But I'm sure all the same that one of these days, if we go on seeing each other, you'll do to me exactly what Alois does to me."

"Namely?"

"You'll fling yourself on top of me, give me a beating, rape me, and in the supreme moment, as they say, you'll call me by the name of Beate."

"You haven't yet told me why I would do it."

"Because Beate denies herself to you as she does to Alois. Because the reason for this denial is mysterious, I mean, spiritual. Now, spiritual denial on the woman's part is exactly what arouses sadism in men."

"But I'm not a sadist, not for one minute."

"You will be, you will be."

She reached out her hand and stroked my head, which I kept stubbornly bowed, my eyes cast down. I said, through clenched teeth: "All right. But now, please, go back. Let's return to Alois. Who is Alois, really?"

"A party official."

"And in private life?"

"He has a kennel outside Berlin where he raises German shepherds."

"Does Alois devote a lot of time to his kennel?"

"No, he comes out every so often to see how things are doing. I'm the one who takes care of it."

"He comes out every so often and then jumps on you and forces you to play the part of Beate."

"That's right."

I said suddenly: "Beate spoke to me very little about her husband. But the little she did tell me made me want to know more."

"What did she tell you? That he horrifies her because his hands are stained with blood?"

"How did you know that?"

"I'm drunk but I'm not deaf. You said it yourself, muttered it, a little while ago."

"Well?"

"Well, it's a sensational remark aimed at impressing you. Maybe to justify her repugnance toward him. But there's no truth in it."

"What is the truth then?"

"The usual: Beate's histrionics. In any case, it's wrong of her to slander Alois. She's his wife, whether she likes it or not; and he adores her, there's no other word for it. If Alois horrified her so much, she should have abandoned the pianist to his fate, not marry Alois."

"She isn't a wife; she's a prisoner, the victim of blackmail."

"That's what she'd like you to believe. But things are more complicated than that."

"How?"

"Beate always knew about my affair with Alois. And yet, that night, their wedding night, she was the one who made Alois come to my house. She said to him: 'If you're so overcome with desire, go to Trude. She's my twin, we're identical; she won't reject you, you'll see.' "

"How could she know you wouldn't reject him?"

"She knew I still loved him. And in fact, she added: 'She not only won't reject you, but she'll pretend to be me, in every way.' "

"What did she mean by that?"

"She meant that I'd pretend to be her even in what made us most different: our politics."

"I'm sorry, but I don't understand."

"It's clear, however: with Alois I was also to pretend to be horrified by him because, as she told you, his hands were stained with blood."

"What does this mean? That you had to fake anti-Nazi feelings?"

"Exactly. To give him the illusion of making love with Beate, I had to resist him not only physically but also politically."

"Politically?"

"I had to speak against the party and against the Führer, as he thought Beate would speak if she were sincere. The more I spoke against the party and the Führer, the more he became aroused. In the end, when he flung himself on me and slapped me, his violence, somehow, was sincere; he really was outraged, really beside himself. Then, at the moment of orgasm, he demanded that I cry: 'Long live the Führer'; that was supposed to be the cry of Beate terrified by her beating. Immediately afterwards, however, panic-stricken, he made me swear I'd never reveal to anyone these sacrilegious rituals of his."

"In other words, you were to play the role of Beate in every possible way. Is this still going on?"

"Of course. For example, the other night, in Naples, in the hotel, he came to my room and wanted us to make love, inspired by Beate's mania, the double suicide, Kleist-style."

"Alois knows Beate has taken Kleist as her model?"

"How could he help but know? That night in Naples, however, he seemed crazier than usual to me. He wanted us to make love; immediately afterwards, at his command, I had to exclaim: 'Let's kill ourselves together, the way Kleist and Henriette did.' The moment I said it, he jumps out of bed, digs into the pocket of his coat, pulls out a little silver box, and says to me: 'These are cyanide pills! Are you ready, then?' I don't mind telling you, he really scared me. True, we were still playing the game in which I was Beate, and he was making love with Beate; but the cyanide was real. If the game had gone on, they would have found both of us dead, in a Naples hotel: a magnificent scandal. I said to him: 'Who do you think you're talking to? I'm Trude, your sister-in-law, and I have no wish to die.' Then he starts laughing and says: 'But the cyanide isn't cyanide, either; it's saccharine, I put it in my coffee because I'm diabetic.' He was telling the truth, but he said it with a certain tone that only made me more afraid. So, in a moment when he wasn't watching, I stuck my hand into his coat pocket and stole his little box of saccharine. Now I have it at the pensione; I wish somebody who knows about such things would tell me if it really is saccharine or cyanide."

"In other words, you believed Alois was being serious."

"He's always serious. That's exactly why I was afraid."

"What do you actually know, you and Beate, about Alois?"

"We know that he goes to his office every morning, at party headquarters, and comes back every evening. We know that he's a very orderly man, he likes classical music, especially Bach, and has a sweet tooth, and his hobby is photography."

I said, pursuing the subject: "You don't know any-

thing about him except that he's a party official. But Beate's words, the fact that he horrifies her because his hands are stained with blood, would suggest that she at least knows something more."

She shook her head. "What could she know? If it's true—and it is—that Alois is a party official, she can't know anything at all."

"Wait a minute. Every day in Italy we hear news of episodes of violence in Germany. You know nothing about Alois's public life; could you be absolutely sure Alois hasn't taken part in some episode of the kind?"

"Yes. It's highly unlikely that a rather important official like Alois would personally and directly take part in episodes of violence."

"But impersonally and indirectly?"

"Then all of us in Germany might have hands stained with blood."

"Now I understand why Beate wants to kill herself."

She protested immediately: "Beate wanted to kill herself long before she met Alois. And besides you still refuse to understand one thing."

"What?"

"It's always the same fact: Beate's histrionics."

I answered angrily: "The truth is that in Beate, even if unconsciously, there's the sorrow of the world. That sorrow you're incapable of feeling and still less of imagining."

She said nothing, she merely looked at me, strangely placid. I went on, after a moment: "Beate is the only woman I can love, with whom I could live. I'll go and find her in Germany, I'll convince her to come live with me in Italy."

"What will you offer Beate?"

"You're referring to what we might call the material aspects."

"That's right."

I recited primly: "I'm an only child, my father is a landowner of average standing. He lives in a little provincial city and is a doctor by profession. I live in Rome and my father gives me a monthly allowance which would be enough for two people to live on simply. Besides, I earn something with my translations, articles, other literary work. I'm not rich; but I'd see that Beate never lacked for anything."

She looked at me with a faint smile, perhaps not entirely mocking. Then she said softly, sweetly: "Can't you realize that Beate doesn't want to live with you or with anybody else: she simply wants to die?"

"When it suits you, you say she's showing off; when it doesn't suit you, you say the opposite."

"Not at all, I always say the same thing: she's a showoff and therefore she wants to die."

I remained quiet: in Trude's hostility toward her sister there was something obscure and undecipherable that I couldn't put my finger on. Seeing that I didn't speak, she went on: "You take Beate seriously, don't you? Then tell me please what you expect of her, once you're in Germany. What she wants from you, she's already told you; if you take her seriously, you must then be convinced that she won't budge an inch from her plan. In any case, it's clear that she won't consent to become your wife: you should be convinced of this at least. So, I repeat: what are you going to Germany for? To act the part of the Italian intellectual, son of a landowner of average standing, who wants to marry the German beauty?"

Her tone was so coldly contemptuous and cutting that I felt a shiver run down my spine. I answered angrily: "It's easy for you to make fun of my rescue plan because you see in it only what I've decided to let you see:

the little three-room, kitchen-and-bath apartment, the cheap car, the petit-bourgeois couple. But the fact that I've allowed you to see only this doesn't mean there isn't more."

She looked at me, immobile, alert, as if fascinated. "More? What?"

"If you promise not to make fun of me, and not speak ill of Beate, I'll try to explain it to you."

She started laughing. "Why does it irritate you so much to be teased? All right, I promise."

I was silent for a moment; then, as if taking courage from her promise, I said: "What do you think makes me love Beate?"

"I don't know. How could I know?"

I looked at her solemnly: "What makes me love her is the fact that we have something in common."

"Namely?"

"We are both in despair."

"Who says that Beate is? Did she perhaps tell you?"

"You yourself said she wants to die."

"She wants to die for aesthetic reasons, not out of despair."

"Aesthetic?"

"Yes. Theatrical, that is. She wants to play a certain role to the end."

"I asked you not to speak ill of Beate."

"In fact, I didn't speak ill of her. This time I didn't say she was showing off. I only said she wants to act a certain role. So you and she have despair in common. Let's skip Beate's. But yours—what is it like? Are you also looking for someone who wants to kill herself with you? Or are you thinking of killing yourself alone?"

"You see? You can't stop being sarcastic."

"Again, forgive me. Don't bother about me: talk."

I pondered a moment, then went on, with a sigh: "We're both in despair, but a different despair. Beate would like to follow the logic of despair to the end, to suicide, that is. Whereas I reject this logic."

"You don't want to kill yourself, eh?"

I answered with a somehow comical sincerity: "If it were possible, I'd prefer not to."

She burst out laughing, then held out her hand and stroked my cheek tenderly: "At least you're sincere; hurrah for sincerity."

Strangely, I didn't feel insulted by her ironic tone; perhaps because, once again, some obscure sweetness was mixed with it. I insisted. "Let me explain my theory of despair to you."

"Go ahead."

"Mind you, it's not very complicated. I believe, I'm convinced, I'm absolutely certain that the normal condition of man should be despair. A despair as natural as the air we breathe. The only difference is that we breathe without realizing it; and, on the contrary, we can't help realizing we're in despair. Now I've come to the conclusion that whereas, on the one hand, we must firmly reject the many illusions that nature offers us; on the other, we must stabilize despair, that is accept its norms, as, in our social life, we accept laws. We live in a despairing world; we must obey its rules."

She had paid very close attention. She immediately remarked: "But how do you know that once we've renounced death, despair won't lose all its force, and won't turn into an alibi for enjoying life more?"

I answered confidently: "A person isn't in despair every now and then: you are in despair always, no matter what pleasure you derive from life."

She remained silent, after these words of mine, in an

absent, pensive manner. Then she said: "So this is supposed to be your love for Beate? A love made up of calculated despair, the way you calculate the stress on a bridge where traffic passes? But it's still a matter of that aspect of love we have to call spiritual. You haven't mentioned the physical part. And yet Beate is a woman of flesh and blood: what do you feel toward this flesh-and-blood woman?

I answered, a bit embarrassed: "I feel a normal attraction."

At these words, I saw her, inexplicably, react with prompt fury: "Well, then, as sure as we're here on the terrace of this restaurant, you, with her consent, will never get anything, not even a kiss on the forehead. You can go to Germany, you can writhe at her feet, implore, but she won't give you anything, absolutely nothing, not even this." And she flicked her fingernail against a tooth.

"But I . . ."

"Because Beate is frigid, completely and irreparably frigid. Maybe you didn't know that. Well, now you know."

I protested uncertainly: "There are no frigid women, only women who haven't met the right man."

"You Italian men are very sure of yourselves; you think you have a magic wand between your legs that works miracles whenever you want. But it can also happen that a woman is insensitive to your magic and doesn't want anything to do with your wand."

"What do you mean?"

"You don't know everything about Beate."

"All I know is that I know nothing."

"Now I'll tell you the reason why Beate is frigid."

"There's a specific reason?"

"Very specific. Listen to me: I'll tell it to you in the

form of a story, the way Beate has told it to me time and again. Also because, in a story, certain important details emerge better, become more clear and meaningful. Here's the story: One day, when she's nine years old, Beate comes out of the house in the country, near Munich, where she lives with her family. In front of the house there is an immense meadow, sloping gently to a nearby river, which, however, can't be seen because it's hidden by a row of trees. It's June, a hot day, the tall, thick grass of the meadow comes up to Beate's knees as she heads for the river with the idea of taking a swim. Automatically, as she walks along, Beate picks a blade of grass, she wants to chew on it a little, she likes the bitter taste of the grass. But she picks it awkwardly and cuts her finger, exactly as if she had grasped a razor blade in her hand. Beate says aloud: 'Bad.' She presses the wound, a lot of blood oozes out. Then Beate hears a voice say: 'Bad, isn't it? That blade of grass. Let me have a look.' Beate raises her eyes and sees a man of about forty, dark, with pale eyes, very wan, dressed in Tyrolean style, in leather shorts and jacket; he smiles at her and politely insists: 'Let me have a look and see if you've really hurt yourself.' Beate holds out her hand to him, and after examining the finger, he says: 'It's nothing. We'll put a kiss on it, and then you'll feel better.' The man raises Beate's hand to his mouth and sucks the blood for just an instant, then says: 'There. Now where are you going? To the river? Come, give me your hand; we'll go there together.' He takes her by the hand, Beate doesn't have the courage to refuse. But as they go on walking toward the river, through the tall, thick grass, she feels that the man's hand is both cold and bathed in sweat; then she spontaneously expresses her feelings, repeating aloud: 'I'm afraid, I'm afraid.' The man scolds her: 'What are you afraid of, silly? Now we'll go to the river and have a

nice swim.' And so, as she keeps repeating 'I'm afraid' and he tries to reassure her, pulling her by the hand, they vanish beyond the row of trees.

"After half an hour, Beate reappears among the trees and runs through the grass toward the house. The man in Lederhosen isn't with her, he's remained on the bank of the river. Beate runs and thinks that the pain she has just felt was very similar to what she felt when she cut her finger with the blade of grass, a subtle pain, such as a well-sharpened razor can produce. Still running and thinking of this pain, she looks at her legs, sees that the blood has trickled down the inside of her thigh, and then she decides to enter the house through a little back door, from which, by the service stair, she can go up, unobserved, to her bedroom on the second floor."

Trude was silent and looked at me, with a questioning expression, as if to say: What do you think of that? I asked: "And this is the reason why Beate is supposed to be frigid?"

"Yes, at least that's the reason she gives."

The story of Beate's rape gave me the almost incredulous, queasy sensation you feel on discovering the sordid origin of a beloved person's abnormal behavior. But this sensation was immediately erased by that "at least" uttered in a murmur by Trude's lips. I asked: "Why 'at least'? You mean it might not be true?"

She answered in a reasonable and ambiguous tone: "With Beate, everything is possible. You will say, no doubt, that people can't invent certain things, for example the similarity between the pain of the cut and that of the rape; but in the stories of mythomanes like Beate it's precisely the most realistic details that often are made up."

I asked, with curiosity: "But what do you think? Is it a complete invention, or not?"

She was silent a moment, then said: "All things considered, I'd say it's an invention. You know what makes me think that?"

"What?"

"The description of the man who's supposed to have raped her. Just think a minute: dark hair, pale skin, light eyes, dressed in Tyrolean style . . ."

"Well?"

"Add a lank lock of hair over his forehead, and you get . . . Hitler."

Now she was smiling, slyly. I repeated: "Hitler? But why Hitler?"

"Because Beate is obsessively hostile to the Führer. That's why. Remember, the rape might even have happened, mind you. It's the description of the man that doesn't ring true. Beate felt the need to describe him with the Führer's features. It's a real obsession; it's stronger than she is."

After another moment's silence, she went on: "In any case, what does all this matter? For you the important thing to know is something else."

"What?"

"Whether or not I'm frigid."

I was sincerely amazed: "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying the truth. A truth you don't want to admit but all the same you can't ignore. Today, in the boat, when you caressed me, didn't you perhaps have the feeling you were caressing Beate? Don't say no; I read it in your eyes. You were looking at me, but you were seeing Beate."

"So?"

"So, I can assure you that no man raped me at the age of nine and that, in consequence, I'm not at all frigid. In other words: green light, clear sailing with me."

I said nothing; I was amazed and even a bit shocked

by the brutality of the invitation. She went on, after a moment: "Pay attention to what I say. You're trapped in a contradiction. On the one hand, you know for certain that Beate will never let you touch her except on the condition that both of you kill yourselves immediately afterwards. On the other, you would like to make love with her and you have the illusion that, once you've made love, she'll give up her suicide plan. Isn't that right?"

I admitted: "That's right."

"Well, I propose to you a very simple way of resolving the contradiction: a play."

"What sort of play?"

"I'll pretend I'm Beate. A Beate who doesn't reject you, who isn't frigid, who's willing to make love with you. A Beate, also, who seriously means to die with you. You've already had the illusion that I was Beate, today in the boat, and last night on the road; I'll see to it that your illusion is even more complete, until it surpasses love and comes close to death. But if I fail to convince you, then you'll be authorized to stop the performance, exactly the way you break off the rehearsal of a play when you realize the actors don't know their lines."

"What do you mean: come close to death?"

"You have to trust me. We'll graze it; but it'll be up to you to see the play remains a play."

I couldn't help asking: "Excuse me, but why would you do all this? Only to prove to me that you're Beate's perfect double?"

"What a question! Because you attract me and, it seems, to make myself attractive to you, I have to pretend to be my sister."

"But you'll never succeed completely in deceiving me that you are."

She started laughing with a jarring confidence. "You want me to try being Beate for a moment? Here. Look."

She rested her chin on her clasped hands, and looked hard at me: grim, unhappy, determined; the unmistakable gaze that I knew so well abruptly transformed her into Beate. I couldn't suppress a cry of surprise. Not laughing any more, Trude added: "And now, look at Trude." The despairing gaze vanished, replaced by a feline, provocative glance. At the same time, Trude slipped forward on her chair, then I felt her bare foot, concealed by the table, move between my legs and upward towards my groin. Trude said, childishly, speaking of herself in the third person: "You see? Now Trude is returning the caress you gave her in the boat. You like it? But, I know, you wish this foot belonged to the sad, despairing Beate. Anything to please: now Beate will look at you with all possible despair and, at the same time, masturbate you."

She blinked hard, as you might shake a kaleidoscope to shift the composition of the bits of colored glass; and there again was the grim, unhappy gaze of Beate; but, at that same moment, the foot she was extending between my legs achieved its purpose: under its pressure, its rubbing, the wriggling of the toes, I felt the warm tingle, the tumescence of erection. Trude asked me, insisting: "What do you say? You must admit your dream is coming true: Beate and Trude fused into the same person."

Her foot pressed hard, with a violent sweetness; which filled me, in turn, with another sweetness, yearning and lusting. I drew my chair back and asked: "When will the play begin?"

"Tonight. I'll come to your room some time after

midnight. And now goodbye; I'm tired and drunk. Don't follow me. I need to be alone."

Brusquely, she rose from the table and went off toward the exit. I remained seated, called the waiter, and asked for the check.

XI

I went up to Anacapri later. The moment I entered the hall of the pensione, I went straight to the clerk's desk. Signor Galamini was reading the paper. I said to him point-blank: "I want to inform you that I'm leaving on the nine o'clock boat."

"Tomorrow?"

"No, today. This evening."

"In that case, you should pay for the room tonight as well. I'll make it half-price."

"Thank you."

"Will you be taking the bus or a carriage?"

"A carriage. Could you find out, in the meanwhile, if there is a connection between the boat and a direct train from Naples to Germany?"

"All right. I'll look it up."

This dialogue, like something out of a conversation manual for tourists, suddenly ended with a sentence also from the manual. Signor Galamini turned toward the cubbyholes, saying: "There's a letter for you."

I was amazed: a letter? Who could write me at Anacapri? My mother perhaps? Or, if not her, who? I took the envelope, went off to one side of the hall, opened it, and read: "My love, the only love of my life, I'll come to your room tonight. Expect me some time after midnight. Your Beate, who wants to live and die with you."

The reading of this letter prompted in me a kind of wooden, marionette's movement. I turned on my heels and I said to Signor Galamini: "Actually, I've changed my mind; I'm not leaving, after all. I'll leave, I'll leave . . . another day."

"Very well. But, for your own sake, I must ask you to let me know in advance next time. Otherwise, I'll be forced to charge you full price for the room."

I looked at Signor Galamini with such an absent expression that he felt called upon to add: "After all, we're at the height of the season and there's a great demand for the rooms." Then from my mouth came the question I hadn't succeeded in formulating till then: "Excuse me, but this letter . . . when was it delivered? The fact is that, just a little while ago, I saw the person who wrote it and it seems strange they didn't say anything to me."

Signor Galamini rejected the conversational embryo I was offering him. He said shortly: "The lady left this letter this morning, before going to the beach."

I made a rapid calculation: Trude had come down to the beach after me; so the letter had been handed in at the desk after I had left but before she herself went out.

Therefore, and this was the most important fact, Trude, that morning, even before seeing me, had decided to perform the role of Beate with me, a performance that, obviously, she was sure she could make me accept. And, indeed, I thought as I started up the stairs, the unfolded letter in my hand, I had accepted it. The promptness of my acceptance was underlined by the fact that, once I read the letter, I canceled my trip to Germany, only a moment after announcing it to Signor Galamini.

Obviously, I thought when I reached my room, Trude's letter with Beate's signature had convinced me to cancel the trip because it had suddenly created the atmosphere of the play, just as the sound of the gong, in theaters, announces the resumption of the performance, after an interruption due, as they say, to technical difficulties. Why, as a rule, do the spectators remain? Why don't they leave after a reasonable wait? For three reasons: because they're curious to see how the play comes out; because they have spent good money for their ticket; because, though they are neither stingy nor curious, they are interested in the author's artistry. Of the three reasons, the first two didn't seem applicable to me: I wasn't curious to see how this play would end: between me and Trude by now there was a tacit agreement that the play would end precisely with the physical relationship that Beate from the beginning had completely denied. The second reason was even more unfounded: in fact, in renouncing my trip to Germany, I was refusing to pay the price of the ticket, or, in other words, by accepting the play, I was refusing the proposal of double suicide: practically speaking, I was watching the performance free. The third reason remained and seemed to me the only valid one: in renouncing the trip to Germany and accepting the play, I

showed I was interested in the artistry of the author, that is, I was in love neither with Trude nor with Beate, but with the ghost that, through the play, would be interposed between me and the twins. This was the ghost neither of Trude nor of Beate, but a third woman who had a bit of one and a bit of the other, prepared to make love in the carnal way characteristic of Trude and, at the same time, retaining, even in physical love, the despairing spirituality characteristic of Beate. And all this without asking me to carry despair to the point of suicide, or physical love to the vulgarity of the summer affair. But who had invented this two-faced character? The immediate answer was Trude; she, in fact, was responsible for the idea of the play. But then, on second thought, I realized that I myself could equally be the author. This imaginary woman who was at once Trude and Beate, with whom I made love and shared despair, without, however, arriving at suicide: wasn't she perhaps the companion that I dreamed would be at my side in the way of life I called stabilized despair? Moreover, it was up to me whether or not the play went on, that is, whether, between Trude and Beate, the third woman assumed a form, this woman who, in reality, was the only one I felt I loved. Yes, because, in the end, the fact was that through the play I would obtain something that neither Trude nor Beate was capable of giving me.

This something, I repeated to myself (and the repetition, in this case, was inevitable, because by repetition I would convince myself of the validity of this solution of my problem), was despair without death; that is, the answer to the question that, arriving in Capri, I had imagined reading on the scroll that an immense bat was holding suspended in the sky over the island, as in the Dürer engraving: "Is it possible to live in despair and

not wish for death?" Perhaps because this answer, which I deemed would be affirmative, had such importance in my life, I was consoled by the personal and selfish nature of the play, telling myself that in it there was something impersonal and unselfish. Yes, through the play, I would not so much succeed in making love with Beate as I would affirm a universal truth valid not only for her and for me but also for everybody.

In the midst of these thoughts I fell asleep, as I was, fully dressed, stretched out on the bed. Then I had the following dream: I am seated at a closed window overlooking a terrace or a balcony; in fact, there beyond the panes Trude appears and speaks to me. I don't hear her voice because of the closed window; I signal to her that I can't understand. Then she has recourse to an eloquent sign language: she points to herself, touching her chest with her hand; and then she mimes walking along the balcony and entering my room through the door that I know I have locked. Naturally, I shake my head no. I don't want Trude to come into my room because I'm waiting for someone: to be precise, the imaginary woman who is at once Trude and Beate. Trude won't give up, standing behind the pane she does a further provocative pantomime: winks, sticks out her tongue, licks her lips, lowers the front of her dress, shows me her bosom. But again I say no; I keep saying no. Then, in Trude's place, there behind the glass, Beate appears. As usual, her face has a determined and unhappy expression; the opposite of Trude, she makes no gesture, doesn't move; she waits. What is she waiting for? It seems clear to me that she's waiting to be invited to enter my room by the door behind my back. But once again I shake my head no, not without sorrow, true, because, after all, Beate is the woman I have loved

till now; I say no and Beate also goes away, as Trude went away a moment before. There, suddenly someone knocks at the door. I am sure that this time the person knocking is neither Beate nor Trude but is the third woman, for whom I am waiting. And so I call out to her to come in. Obviously, however, I haven't called loud enough because the knocking, curiously insistent and at once subdued and prudent, continues. Then, as if to see what is really happening, I wake up.

Someone really was knocking at the door; with insistence but also, as I had already noted in the dream, with discretion and almost with timidity. Now I was no longer dreaming; so it was logical for me to think it was, no doubt, Trude, who for some reason of her own, had advanced the visit set for that night. Strangely, this supposition did not please me: I wasn't prepared at this moment to witness the play. All the same, I got up and went to open the door. To my amazement, I found myself facing not Trude but her mother.

Paula was wearing Chinese-style pajamas of black silk, with a multicolored dragon embroidered in one corner of the tunic. Her thin arms, dotted with broad, dark freckles, seemed thinner still, emerging from the ample, bell-bottom sleeves. I was struck once more by the masculine appearance of her head: cropped hair, black and shiny, with two sharp, comma-shaped curls around the big, cartilaginous ears; straight, authoritarian nose; heavy, sensual, contemptuous mouth. But I was struck, too, as if I were noticing it for the first time, by the difference between the upper part of the body and the lower: the former was flat and thin under the slack fabric of the pajamas; the latter, from the hips down, curving and muscular, with sturdy thighs which, at every moment, seemed to stretch the tight silk of the

trousers. These must have been muscles produced by riding, which, as I knew, was Paula's favorite sport; but at that moment those strong legs, accustomed to gripping the saddle, seemed to me to express the true character of Paula, on the surface so maternally affectionate with Trude, but underneath bossy, demanding, and possessive. She said to me at once, speaking German: "No doubt you were expecting Trude, even though, actually, your rendezvous is for tonight. But since Trude tells me you plan to leave with us for Germany, I've come to speak to you. To save you a pointless trip, if for no other reason."

I decided that Trude, because of her usual jealousy of her sister, had asked her mother to intervene and dissuade me from making the trip. It was a logical supposition, justified by that remark: "to save you a pointless trip, if for no other reason." I immediately told myself that I should hold out, not give in at any price, neither to flattery nor to threats. For that matter, what could Beate's mother tell me? That her daughter loved her husband and wanted nothing to do with me? That it had all been the usual summer affair and I shouldn't take it seriously? That the husband, thanks to his official position, could have me expelled from Germany? That, in any case, in going to see Beate, I would expose myself to a mortifying rejection? Even as I was imaging all these eventualities in haste, I made a little bow and invited the woman to come in. She stepped forward, went to the armchair at the foot of the bed, and settled in it, crossing her legs, with worldly nonchalance. I noticed that a little gold chain was hanging around her right ankle; I recalled, as a coincidence perhaps not without meaning, that a similar little chain circled Beate's ankle. Paula began, somewhat stiffly polite: "You

must forgive me for coming like this without warning. A woman never goes to a man's room, unless she has serious motives of what we might call a sentimental nature. But I am a somewhat special woman. And besides, as you must have guessed, I haven't come for my own sake but for my darling Trude's."

A somewhat special woman! My darling Trude! This wasn't, or rather this didn't seem, a mother's language. Paula added, confirming my uneasiness: "In any event, you must believe me, I wouldn't have come if, besides Trude, I hadn't also been concerned for you. It's chiefly for your sake that I'm here."

This claim to altruism outraged me, as a piece of clumsy and bold-faced hypocrisy. I had sat on the edge of the bed. I sprang to my feet. "No, that's too much! What have I got to do with it? Or Trude? You've here because of Beate: don't deny it. But let's get it quite clear from the start: nothing and no one will prevent me from leaving for Germany and going to see Beate."

Strangely, she wasn't taken aback by my agitation; she merely looked at me with curiosity. Then she said, in a kindly voice: "Do calm down, be seated, and listen to me."

"I am quite calm, and with all the calm in the world I must inform you that I intend to leave tomorrow for Germany."

She made an indulgent gesture. "Now, now."

I sat down again on the bed and, trying to give my voice a normal tone, I went on: "Excuse me, but it is hard for me to remain calm when someone talks to me about Beate."

"But I'm here to talk not about Beate, but about Trude and only Trude."

I felt a bit relieved. But I also realized that I didn't

understand: Paula wanted to spare me a pointless trip and at the same time she assured me that she wasn't here to talk about Beate; now I would make the trip solely to see Beate, so why was Paula here then? The contradiction prompted me to display a reasonableness I didn't really feel: "I understand; you are Trude's mother, too. But, while you can reproach me for nothing as far as Beate is concerned, I presume you have a great deal to say to me about my relations with Trude. Well, I am quite ready to give you all the explanations you wish. Not least because I would like, in exchange, for a number of things to be explained to me."

She answered in a coldly promising tone, taking from her bag a long tortoise shell and silver cigarette holder. "Never fear: everything will be explained to you. I beg your pardon: do you have a cigarette?"

I hastened to hand her the package. She lighted one, took a puff, then said: "First of all, I'm not Trude's mother."

I stammered: "You're not Trude's mother? What does that mean? You introduced yourself as the mother of Trude and Beate."

She replied, calmly: "I repeat: I am not Trude's mother. I'm only a friend. I'm an actress, too, and I was in the same company as Trude."

"Again, I don't understand. I was always told that Beate was the actress and Trude managed Müller's kennel. What are all these surprises?"

She shook her head. "It's time you knew. Beate doesn't exist; she never existed. Trude, with you, was pretending to be Beate."

I felt a profound, but lucid amazement: like a long, endless fall during which you can still manage to think. I decided finally that I could, indeed, believe her; but I

realized that my wonder was mixed with a sudden distrust. It had occurred to me, in fact, that the two nonexistences, of Paula as mother and of Beate as twin, were simply two elaborate and clumsy lies to get rid of me. To be sure, this was a supposition even more incredible than the falsehood it was meant to unmask. But anyway, in my amazement I found nothing better. "But for days and days I ate with Beate sitting before me, at the table next to mine! Why, I spoke with her!"

I was about to add: And she told me that she loved me! She proposed we kill ourselves together like Kleist and Henriette Vogel! But, out of modesty, I restrained myself. I concluded, in a sarcastic tone: "Your revelations don't convince me. May I ask what is hidden behind all this?"

Paula stared at me as if she were seeing me for the first time. "You don't believe me, I see. If you like, I'll have everything confirmed by Trude."

I answered angrily: "How do I know Trude isn't in this with you? I repeat: what's behind it all?"

"Only the wish to put an end to a joke that, at this point, has gone on far too long."

I replied, venomously: "What joke?" The idea, in fact, suddenly occurred to me that what Paula was calling a "joke" was my whole relationship, so mysterious and fascinating, with Beate.

She looked at me sympathetically; she must have realized that once again I hadn't understood. She spat out a shred of tobacco that had stuck to her lip and said: "The two of us, Trude and I, are very intimate friends and we're both actresses. Perhaps because of our profession, every now and then we enjoy joking, pretending to be other people, for example, and acting our parts, fooling people, but all of this without any malice or harm, only

to enjoy ourselves and have a good time. So, when we decided to spend our vacation in Italy and, especially, on Capri, which is famous for the number of young Italian males who go there deliberately to seduce credulous and naïve German girls, Trude and I decided to play a joke on some Italian Don Juan. Trude was to precede me, with her husband, and she would pick up the first Italian young man she found suitable. Then, a few days later, I would arrive and, pretending to be Trude's mother, I would take her husband's place. The joke was to consist chiefly of inventing the character of Beate the twin, physically identical, but, as to character, the exact opposite of Trude. I mean that, whereas Trude loves life and has never dreamed of committing suicide, we imagined Beate as a very romantic girl, a great admirer of Kleist, long in search of a man prepared to kill himself with her, as Kleist did with Henriette Vogel. Once she was sure that you were really in love with her, Trude was supposed to suggest dying together. At this point, however, Beate would disappear, because Trude would pretend to leave Capri and then come back with me, and for my part, I would pretend to be the mother of the twin girls. Trude would lead you to betray her absent sister with her; then, at the climax, she would reveal the joke, shaming you and showing you that all your great love for Beate in reality didn't exist. The joke," Paula concluded, after a moment's silence, "worked very well as long as Trude was pretending to be Beate. But then something happened we hadn't foreseen and so I decided to come to your room and speak to you."

I asked: "What wasn't foreseen?"

She answered with curt and haughty sincerity: "It turned out you weren't the usual Italian Casanova. And

you really did fall in love with the imaginary Beate, to the point of deciding to go to Germany and ask her to be your wife."

This time it seemed clear I could no longer doubt Paula's sincerity. Two things made me realize Paula was telling the truth: the first was the stupidity and vulgarity of the "joke": the two German ham actresses who, during their Capri holiday, want to amuse themselves at the expense of Italian young men, inspired by the cliché that brands all men in Italy as Casanovas; and the other cliché, of a literary nature, of the double suicide à la Kleist; how could I fail to recognize in these elements of the so-called joke, the unmistakable trademark of the subculture permeating the German middle class?

There was, however, another reason that made me realize Paula was telling the truth: Trude hadn't invented "another" self but, as Paula said, she had simply agreed with her friend in inventing the opposite of herself. She was or rather she demonstrated that she considered herself jolly, life-loving, sensual, full of common sense, well integrated in the society of her own country; Beate, quite logically, had been instead conceived as spiritual, frigid, melancholy, an outsider. Finally, Trude was a Nazi, anti-Semite, anti-intellectual; Beate, consequently, could not help but be anti-Nazi, intellectual, and pro-Semite. And so on. This symmetry, at the beginning, had fascinated me; now I was amazed that I hadn't noticed earlier its obvious, self-evident banality.

These reflections, like all reflections formulated in dramatic moments, lasted no more than an instant. Then I raised my eyes toward Paula and, as if stimulated by the very presence of Trude's friend, I understood all at once that I still understood nothing. In reality, as I thought,

the revelation of the "joke" had replaced a given situation with a different but no less obscure situation, one, in any case, that was far from being a joke. In fact, the true, profound meaning of the "joke," though I sensed its importance, still completely eluded me. Paula and Trude had wanted to play a joke of a certain sort, but why exactly that sort of joke, since they wanted only to amuse themselves at the expense of an Italian Casanova? Why, in other words, had they invented the character of Beate, so spiritual and so mortuary, with her mania of double suicide modeled on Kleist's?

I wanted to gain time. I insisted: "Very well, then. Trude is an actress, you are an actress, you both wanted to amuse yourself behind my back. But Müller? He isn't an actor; he is only a husband and, moreover, a very jealous husband. How do you explain Müller's complicity in your so-called joke?"

She answered without any hesitation: "We all love our darling Trude, perhaps too much. Alois lent himself to the joke, like me, out of love. He apparently played his part very badly, didn't he? It was inevitable. It's true, he's terribly jealous."

She was silent a moment, then she continued, with insulting frankness: "To tell the truth, he didn't want to play the part of the husband who allows his wife to wink at a man at the next table. We convinced him, Trude and I, by telling him that all Italian males consider themselves irresistible and it was time to teach them a good lesson."

I couldn't help recalling all the "lessons" that, half furious and half complaisant, Müller had given me; and I said: "Thanks, from all us Italians."

"You mustn't take offense. As I told you before, the reason I'm here is because the joke only worked up to a

certain point, because you're a different sort of Italian from the others."

I protested: "What do you mean, an Italian different from the others? I insist that I am exactly like my compatriots. Identical. I must ask you to believe me."

The way she looked at me now was almost friendly, a friendliness provoked no doubt by the fact that I, too, like her, like Müller, showed that I loved "darling" Trude. And she actually held out her hand and mimed a kind of caress over my bent head: "Come, come, now we must be good friends. Perhaps you will visit Germany, no longer to find a ghost but to see Trude, in flesh and blood, and then we'll laugh together over this whole business."

I wasn't listening to her, I was pursuing my own train of thought. I asked sharply: "Does Trude know you've come here to tell me the truth about her fake twin?"

"She doesn't know it yet; I told her I was going into the garden for a breath of air; but I plan to tell her as soon as possible."

I cried, impetuously: "No, please: don't tell her anything. I'd like to be the one to tell her."

"Why?"

I reflected a moment, then I decided to tell her the truth: "Because I want to understand what really happened. That's the only way to find out: don't warn Trude, let her go on with her play. If you tell her, I'll never learn what was behind the joke."

"Why, nothing was behind it. It was only a stupid joke: that's all."

"So much the better, in that case. I'll learn it was only a stupid joke."

"But you've already learned that: don't you trust me?"

"I trust only myself."

She looked at me, puzzled, uncomprehending, though not hostile. Finally she said, with affectionate concern: "But how will you tell her? You Italians can be so violent, especially in this sort of thing."

"Don't worry: I'll tell her in the manner of an intellectual. An Italian intellectual, of course. Intellectuals aren't violent."

"You want Trude not to know anything and to go on playing the part of Beate, because you want to take your revenge, amuse yourself at her expense, like a cat with a mouse. I can't allow that."

I don't know why but, all of a sudden, I felt for Paula the same friendliness that she, a little earlier, had seemed to feel toward me: after all, she demonstrated that she loved the woman I loved. I got up from the bed and went to sit on the arm of her chair, I took her thin, dark hand, and said: "But you, you who insist you're fond of Trude—can't you understand that I want to know better the woman I've fallen in love with?"

With an abrupt movement, she drew back, looked up at me, almost frightened. She said finally: "You're not in love with Trude; you're in love with Beate, with a person who doesn't exist."

"Yes, it's true, but the fact remains that it was Trude who invented Beate, and I want to know why she invented her. And furthermore why she invented Beate precisely and not some other character."

She kept her head drawn back; her neck, all its muscles taut, lifted her chest; the tunic had come open, to reveal her flat, almost nonexistent bosom, slightly furrowed by two circular wrinkles. Then, seeing this masculine chest, I couldn't help connecting it with the chain around her ankle, the close-cropped hair, the way she held her cigarette in the corner of her mouth, letting the smoke rise to her clenched eyes, just as some rather flashy men

smoke. And I told myself that all these traits were linked by a perhaps not entirely unconscious wish to produce a certain impression, to prompt a certain impression, a certain idea of herself. An impression, an idea of masculinity. Suddenly I was sure that between her and Trude there was a homosexual relationship, already implied, for that matter, in Paula's heartfelt affectionate tone when she spoke of her friend. Paula seemed to guess my thought, and she said sharply: "Please go back and sit on the bed; I don't like the way you're looking at my breasts."

Thus she shifted the erotic relationship from Trude to herself, accusing me of feeling for her the desire that in reality I felt for Trude. It occurred to me that if it were true—and I was sure it was true—that the two women were lovers, I could learn the truth about Trude from Paula herself. For that matter, the play Trude and I had agreed on could still take place, whether or not Trude knew the game had been exposed; between her and me there was by now a tie that went beyond the joke and could do without it. Not moving from the chair, I said: "All right, I won't play cat-and-mouse with Trude. Go ahead and tell her I know it was all a joke. But in this case, I must ask you at least to convince me it really was a joke and nothing more."

"But how can I convince you, if at all costs you want to see God knows what hidden motives where instead there's nothing of the sort, absolutely nothing?"

"All you have to do is answer some questions."

"What questions?"

"Nothing personal, nothing indiscreet. Questions you can very well answer."

She looked at me; obviously she didn't dislike the idea of talking about Trude. She said, hesitantly: "I agree to answer only questions I consider legitimate."

"Naturally."

I got up from the chair arm and went back to sit on the bed. She continued: "I realize you want to know more about Trude. But I can tell you something: this is the first stage of love. Afterwards, you give up the idea of knowing and are satisfied with loving."

She seemed moved now; she concluded: "I'll answer your questions, mind you, only because I can feel that you are really fond of our Trude."

Perhaps to assume the pose of the investigator, I lighted a cigarette. Then I began: "Well, first of all, I want to know how long Trude has been a member of the party."

She turned serious, but without any theatricality, as if faced by an unexpected but not eccentric question: "Let me see: Trude joined the party exactly a year and a half ago."

"Before Hitler came into power, then."

"Yes, of course, before."

"But, before joining the party, did Trude take an interest in politics?"

"Not as far as I know. She was an actress, and nothing else."

"All right, she didn't take an interest in politics directly. But she ran around with people who were interested in it. And, moreover, who were not actually favorable to National Socialism."

"I don't know anything about that. Trude saw theater people mostly."

"Speaking of Beate, Trude said she was a chronic failure, a failure as a dancer, as a poet, as a painter. Was she talking about herself, or what?"

"That was all made up. Trude was never a dancer or a poet or a painter: only an actress."

"Trude spoke of her imaginary twin having made

actually three unsuccessful attempts at double suicide. In your opinion, do these three stories of attempted suicide have any counterpart in Trude's life?"

"Absolutely none. We invented the three suicide attempts together, Trude and I, using Kleist's suicide as a model. In fact, this was one of the most amusing parts of the joke. We never stopped perfecting the Beate character; I would add one detail, Trude another. We laughed the whole time, like lunatics. Once the character was created, we rehearsed a bit, like in the theater. I would pretend to be an Italian Casanova, Trude would pretend to be Beate: unhappy, melancholy, mysterious, exactly the way she behaved with you at your first encounter on the boat. Oh, we had great fun! However, if I had been on the boat too, perhaps I would have advised Trude against picking you specifically."

"Why?"

"Because what we needed was a more ordinary sort of Italian man; it's obvious immediately that you're not an ordinary type."

"But an ordinary type wouldn't have accepted the idea of suicide. The fact remains, however, that to amuse yourselves at the expense of Italian Casanovas, ordinary or not, there was no need to drag in Kleist. Why Kleist?"

"He's one of our favorite authors, Trude's and mine; and besides Beate had to be a romantic. Who could be more romantic than Kleist?"

"Anyway, answer this specific question frankly: was there ever, do you think, a suicidal tendency in Trude's life?"

"If you mean did Trude ever attempt to kill herself with somebody, never."

"Not with somebody. Alone."

She looked straight ahead, irresolute, then she admitted:

"There was one episode that made me think of suicide, about two years ago."

"What episode?"

"I'll tell you: Trude and I, at that time, were living together. One day I come home and smell a strong odor of gas. I go to the bath and I find the door locked on the inside. Luckily, it was a glass door, so I break the pane, slip my hand in, turn the key, and enter. Trude was lying on the floor, completely naked and already so stiff that, to carry her out, I had to pull her by the hair. I dragged her to the bed, laid her there, called a doctor. At the time, she told me it had been an accident. She had dozed off in the tub, the flame of the hot-water heater had gone out, and gas began to fill the room. But I remembered very well that, while I was calling the doctor, she opened her eyes, saw me standing by the bed with the phone in my hand, and murmured: 'I want to die, let me die.' It was one of those things people say at certain moments, true. But perhaps it wasn't just idle words, maybe it was something more."

"What?"

She looked at me with distrust. "There are some things you can't understand. A foreigner can't understand what happened in Germany after the war. In any case, try to follow me. First point: Trude has a profound crisis, in the sense that she no longer believes in anything, she scorns ideals, lives a decadent life."

I suddenly had the impression that I was seeing double: as if her personality were splitting, from Trude's Lesbian lover a bourgeoise was now detaching herself, filled with the clichés of Nazi propaganda. I asked: "Excuse me, but what do you mean by a decadent life?"

She shrugged. "Come now, you know very well what decadent life means."

"But a little while ago you said that a foreigner couldn't understand some things about Germany."

"Please, don't interrupt me. Second point: her decadent life logically leads Trude to self-destruction; in fact, she tries to kill herself. Third point: she discovers that ideals do exist; you only have to look around and you find them; she understands that you mustn't live just for yourself, in a sterile individualism, but for others, and that living for others means, at this moment in history, contributing to the rebirth of Germany."

I continued to see double: how could Paula reconcile this patriotic fervor of hers with homosexuality, with that alien, antisocial element that necessarily characterizes homosexual activity? Strangely, her "public" fanaticism underlined, to my eyes, the "private" passion that consumed her. I listened to her; but at the same time I couldn't help imagining her as she bent her hard, thin, rapacious face toward the blazing pubes of Trude, stretched out naked beneath her. I said finally: "In other words, the result of all this was that Trude joined the party, an out-and-out conversion. Something like the road to Damascus for St. Paul."

She hesitated a moment; then she agreed, speaking out of the side of her mouth. "That's right, a conversion." She was silent again, then added: "You shouldn't be sarcastic about Trude's conversion. I witnessed it myself, and I must confess to you that I was amazed by the spontaneity of her feeling."

"Why? Was Trude converted to National Socialism in a different way from you?"

She answered at once with some pride: "I was not converted. I mean, I didn't join the party to solve a private moral crisis. I come from an old military family; in our home, patriotism was a tradition; from the start,

I realized that, at least for the present, Hitler is what Germany needs. For that matter, the place where Trude was converted is significant. You know where it was? In a square, during a rally."

I had an inner jolt: this explained the mystery of Paula's double personality, Lesbian and patriot: Nazism was required not so much for her, who didn't need it, since she was born in an army family, but for Germany, for all those who, like Trude, didn't come from a traditional caste and, for this reason, underwent a moral crisis. This was the point of view, quite familiar to me, of the more conservative circles in Germany. Paula was an aristocrat; petit-bourgeois moralism was alien to her, and so she could reconcile her sexual abnormality with political normality. I said: "After all, you must have been in that square too, since you witnessed the so-called conversion."

"I was there to accompany Trude."

I was quiet for a moment, then I asked: "Where does your family come from?"

"Pomerania."

"Your father was a high army officer?"

"He was a general; he died a few years ago."

"Are you married?"

"You're really giving me the third degree, aren't you? Well, I'm divorced; my husband was also an officer; I have no children. Is that enough, or do you want to know more?"

"Excuse me, but I told you before: I want to know everything about Trude. Now you are so important in Trude's life, it's logical for me to want to know everything about you, too."

"What makes you think I'm important in Trude's life?"

"Didn't you tell me yourself, just now, that the two of you lived together? Living together is important, isn't it? By the way, why did you live together?"

"We both belonged to the same company, Trude no longer wanted to live with her family, I suggested she live with me, I had a very large apartment, and she accepted."

"Did Trude come to live with you before or after your divorce?"

"Before."

"And your husband agreed to have Trude come and live in your house?"

It seemed to me that a faint flush, of embarrassment and anger, spread over her dark, stern face. All the same, she replied with angry precision: "You want to know if my husband approved of my friendship with Trude? Well, here's your answer: my husband disliked Trude, and this was one of the reasons we were divorced."

"Perhaps your husband didn't appreciate Trude's conversion?"

"My husband has very strict traditional ideas: he's a soldier and doesn't mix in politics."

"By the way: you referred to Trude's conversion as something special. And you also witnessed it. Can you tell me how it came about?"

She looked at me for a moment, as if reflecting, then she said: "It was preceded by a dream, a strange dream that illustrates Trude's mood on the eve of what you call her conversion. Trude and I were sleeping together . . ."

I interrupted her: "You slept together?"

"Of course."

"In the same bed?"

"Yes, a double bed. But what does that matter?"

"Nothing at all. Go on."

"The night before the rally at which the conversion took place, all at once, Trude let out a cry, sat up in bed, turned on the light, and began examining the forefinger of her right hand with great care. Meanwhile, I had waked up, and I asked her, amazed, what had happened, why she was examining her finger. Then she told me she had had the following dream: it seems to her that she's in church, she's in a bridal gown, and is slowly coming forward on the arm of the Führer, who is dressed in Bavarian style, with white stockings, leather shorts, green jacket. The Führer and Trude walk slowly toward the altar, filled with flowers, on which instead of the crucifix there is a cloth with the swastika. It's clear that she and the Führer are about to get married, but in a pagan rite she knows nothing about. As the organ plays a wedding march, a man in SS uniform offers the Führer a tray with a pin on it. The Führer takes the pin and Trude feels, almost immediately, a prick on her finger. Then the Führer raises Trude's finger to his mouth and sucks the blood. At this point Trude woke up."

"At the time, what did you say to Trude?"

"I tried to calm her, to console her. She was whimpering, she couldn't stop examining her finger. Finally I gave her a kiss on the finger, then she curled up against me and went back to sleep."

I didn't say anything for a moment. The two details of Hitler dressed in Lederhosen and of the wound from which Hitler sucked blood corresponded strangely and perhaps deliberately to similar details of the rape in the story Trude had attributed to the imaginary Beate. In the end, I asked firmly: "And the conversion, then?"

"I'm coming to that. From the beginning, the moment we were in the square at the rally and I looked toward

the stand with the authorities, I noticed a strange coincidence with Trude's dream: as in the dream, the Führer was wearing Bavarian costume. It's true, however, that it was a rally of the SA of Bavaria. In any case I pointed it out to Trude: 'Look, the Führer's dressed as in your dream.' "

"And what did she do?"

"She squeezed my arm hard, until it hurt, but she didn't say anything. At this point she was fascinated by Hitler, she had eyes and ears only for him. Then I didn't speak any more, I merely observed the effects of the Führer's speech on her. As always happens during Hitler's speeches, the crowd interrupted him often with applause; but Trude, on the contrary, didn't applaud, didn't nod her head, didn't move: she was quiet and still, her whole body taut, her eyes glued on the stand, perhaps she wasn't even listening, she confined herself to watching. Finally the speech ended, and then what you call the conversion took place: suddenly, as applause spread all through the square, Trude let out a cry, raised both arms, and also began clapping her hands."

"And then?"

"She stood up on tiptoe, she seemed so eager to get a better look at him that a big burly man beside her volunteered to lift her up in his arms over the crowd. Trude accepted: there she was in the big man's arms, craning her neck to observe the Führer!"

I said: "A genuine conversion!"

"Yes, obviously, something had happened inside her, but I'm not fond of the word conversion."

"What would you like to call it?"

"I think that, to join a party, simple reflection is enough. After all, it's a question of politics. But in Trude there was that moral crisis I told you about."

"So, immediately after the rally, Trude rushed to join the party."

"Not at all. She went on living more or less as before, then came the episode of the bath, which was a bit like the last gasp of the old, dying Trude. With her joining the party, the new Trude was born."

"Are you really sure?"

"I'm not sure of anything, but it's a fact that Trude, before the party, hated life and, afterwards, she loved it."

"What life? Life in general or life with you?"

I uttered these words almost despite myself. In reality, they were prompted by a sudden, unexpected jealousy that made me see, with immediate clarity, Trude kneeling, her face buried between Paula's muscular thighs and Paula's hand, demanding and convulsed, pressed on the slender white nape, to keep it bent. This time, Paula didn't pretend not to understand, as she had before. She straightened up, she asked: "What do you mean?"

"I mean: Trude and you: how long have you been lovers?"

Strangely, even as I spoke in this way, I had the illusion I could leap over the many obstacles that separated me from her. I added hastily: "Don't misunderstand me. I love Trude and so I'm fond of all those who are fond of her. In my question there's only the idea that the two of us love the same person. That's all."

But I soon realized she wouldn't accept this explanation. She had another, perhaps more suited to the kind of relationship that existed between her and Trude, even if it was completely unreal. She stood up and said in a voice shaking with outrage: "I understand. You would like to make love with both: the two naïve German women and the sophisticated Italian in search of per-

versions. No, sir, no, no, Mr. Italian. Paula and Trude have another idea of love."

She went to the door, opened it, stopped at the threshold, and hurled this final invective: "You intellectuals always have to soil everything."

She went out; the door closed.

XII

Here I was, again stretched out supine on the bed, my favorite position when I felt like abandoning myself to fantasies. It's true that, on the contrary, I should have been rationally examining my relationship with Trude; to draw my conclusions, as they say. But the whole business of the so-called joke belonged more to fantasy than to reason. And, stretching out on the bed to think it over some more, I felt an obscure premonition that there were no conclusions to be drawn because my sincere and genuine relationship with Trude was only now beginning and therefore it was better for me to daydream about what might happen in the future than investigate rationally what had happened in the past.

The first thing I became aware of the moment I turned

my mind to the "joke" was that I didn't feel the irked frustration that usually follows a trick of which we have been the victim. I supposed anyone else in my place would have become angry and then would have dismissed the incident with a shrug and an expression on the order of "That'll teach me," or something of the sort. Instead, I immediately realized that I felt no resentment and that, consequently, I wasn't at all prepared to "dismiss the incident." Among other things, this was confirmed by the obscure and amazed awareness that I still harbored the loving feeling, quite unaltered, and indeed somehow deeper and more convinced, that had enabled Trude to deceive me so easily. This feeling now took the form of an ardent curiosity to know more about her: and therefore, since knowing more about her meant acting, it also took the form of a desire to proceed in my strange romance, to bear all its unpredictable consequences to the end.

If, in fact, I refused to take the joke as a stupid trick conceived by a pair of actresses on their vacation, but took it rather as something that had a hidden meaning of its own and concerned Trude and only Trude, then I realized, as I said before, that nothing was finished; on the contrary, everything was only beginning. And it was beginning precisely with that question I had already asked myself during my talk with Paula: "Why did Trude invent this specific joke? To make fun of Italian Don Juanism, wasn't it enough to invent a great love perhaps seasoned with a pinch of adultery, without bringing in despair, Kleist, double suicide?"

True, all this could also be explained with Trude's professional theatricality. But, still, why was her theatricality expressed in that particular fiction and not in another?

At this point, however, the love sentiment came in. Trude wasn't a puzzle to be solved by logic: she was a human being who, after Paula's revelation, I seemed to love more than before, precisely because the joke, with its obscure implications, had made her more profound and more complex to my eyes. Now the fascination that in the past had emanated from the imaginary figure of Beate, was enriched by the fact that Trude and Beate were the same person and that this person, to carry out the trick, had been capable of doubling herself perfectly, making herself into two different people, indeed opposite people. Such an operation, even if partly unconscious, or rather precisely because it was unconscious, testified to something very like love on Trude's part, love for me. On closer consideration, Trude seemed to have invented Beate for me; that is, she had risen above herself, to love me and to make herself loved. So the invention of Beate transformed Trude the moment she succeeded in putting it in effect. And I realized I was in love not so much with the imaginary Beate or the imagining Trude, but rather with a woman who was at once Beate and Trude, that is, at the same time the invention and the inventor.

This woman had everything I could desire, everything I had been unable to obtain thus far, because of the fact that Beate and Trude canceled each other out. She was in despair like Beate; but, like Trude, she was ready to make love; she was spiritual like Beate, but also animalesque like Trude; she was on the brink of suicide like Beate; but she really didn't want to die, like Trude. And thus the story came full circle, in my favor: Trude and Beate blended in a sole person would allow me to carry out my plan of stabilizing despair as a normal condition of human existence. My plan that, without the

presence and help of a woman I loved, I would never succeed in carrying to a successful conclusion, because solitude, over a long time, would plunge me both into the hypocrisy of impotence and into that very suicide that had served to bait the trap of the "joke."

But what, concretely, remained for me to do? Simply, I concluded, ask Trude to leave her husband, then bring her away from Germany, come and live with her in Italy. In a radiant and somewhat unreal prospect I saw the two of us, Trude and me, as the first couple capable of living without the crutch of false hopes, in the cold, clear light of a complete and definitive despair.

Meanwhile, however, the thought that this night Trude would come to my room, pretending for the last time, in agreement with me, to be Beate, moved me deeply. I couldn't dwell on the image of Trude entering, all enclosed in her pretense, like a somnambulist in his dream, without feeling that I loved her and for love I could do anything. Even keep Paula's visit a secret from her, even arrive at the brink of suicide.

There was, of course, the possibility that Paula by now had already told Trude about her visit to me. But I was sure that, whether Paula had spoken and Trude knew that I knew, or whether Paula hadn't spoken and Trude didn't know that I knew, Trude wouldn't give up the idea of the play. For her, too, probably, the real, genuine relationship with me was only beginning.

I heard at this point the usual racket of the supper gong moving along the three floors of the pensione, and I rushed out of the room: I wanted to be already seated at table at the moment of Paula's and Trude's entrance. From their demeanor, studied in good time, I would know whether or not Paula had told Trude about her visit.

But the two friends had preceded me into the dining room. There they were, in their corner, seated one with her back against one wall, and the other with her back against the other wall, like a pair of actresses who, the moment you see them, suggest the parts they have recently played. And in fact, though I now knew for certain that Paula wasn't the mother and Trude wasn't Beate, on seeing them, I couldn't help recalling the roles they had played till now in the so-called joke invented at my expense. Furthermore, once I was seated at table, I realized, with amazement, that the joke was still going on. Paula continued acting the mother, with dignity and indulgence; and for her part, Trude not only continued pretending to be the daughter, but also, with a secondary fiction, to behave like the imaginary Beate. Faithful to the play, whether or not she knew Paula had revealed the truth to me, she stared at me, her expression grim and unhappy, without touching her food, her chin resting on her joined hands. Then it occurred to me: In reality, Trude isn't pretending, she's never pretended to be Beate. Beate is the name she gives the spiritual part of herself.

And so the joke went on and developed: I realized this from the unforeseen cordiality of Paula, whom I had imagined hostile, as she replied to my greeting. Then I saw Trude lean toward her friend and whisper something to her and then, besides the certitude of their homosexual bond, I was certain also of their persistent plotting about me. No, the joke wasn't over; it stretched into the future; it would continue in any case in the approaching night, when Trude would give herself to me with no counterdemand of suicide, but simply because this was what the play she and I had agreed upon required.

My supposition that the joke continued was further confirmed as soon as supper was over and I left the dining room. The two friends were waiting for me, almost in ambush, in the hall, pretending to ask Signor Galamini for some information. But the moment I appeared, Paula left Trude, came to me, and said: "Good evening. Would you care to come and take coffee with us in the parlor?"

For a moment we looked each other in the eye; on my lips was the question: Then you told Trude you spoke with me? Paula must have sensed it because she added hastily and in a whisper: "Look, Trude doesn't know we saw each other."

I murmured: "Thanks."

"Don't thank me: I have reason to believe Trude wants to explain herself to you personally."

So Trude didn't know that I knew. Or rather, as I promptly thought, the two women had agreed to make me believe Trude didn't know. But why this agreement, borne out for that matter by Paula's otherwise inexplicable cordiality toward me? Clearly, because the two women, in all likelihood, had decided, as I had, that our real relationship was only beginning.

I tried to betray nothing of these reflections in my smiling face. I replied: "Gladly, but on condition that, instead of sitting in that dusty old room, we go and have coffee at the bar in the village. The moon is full, we could stroll as far as the Cesare Augusto, to look at the moon on the sea. What do you say?"

Meanwhile, Trude had joined us: the triangular face, more feline than ever, under the mass of disheveled red hair; the thin, adolescent's shoulders exposed by a green satin dress, all pleats; the opaline purse clutched in the freckled, bony hand. She looked at me from the depths of the great, weary and unhappy pupils and seemed once

again the imaginary Beate, further confirmation that the "joke," after a moment's recess, had resumed its tortuous and obscure path.

She said hastily: "Yes, let's go to the café. Let's take the moonlight stroll. Don't say no, Mamma; I can't bear that parlor either. It smells musty."

But Paula still had to play her role as the stern mother and—why not?—as patriot. She replied stiffly: "Trude, you know very well that there can be absolutely no question of taking a moonlight stroll. First of all, what would all the Germans in the pensione say?"

I spoke up, jokingly: "What would they say? They'd say that we are three people who prefer the moon of 1934 to a parlor of 1880."

Paula looked at me for a moment, unsmiling, then said sharply: "That's not the point. We've been informed that at eleven-thirty this evening there will be a special speech, or rather, an important announcement by the Führer. We absolutely have to stay in the pensione and listen to it on the radio."

I exclaimed: "That's fine! We can go and listen to it on the café radio, in the village."

"No, we must listen to it here."

Trude asked, in a noncommittal tone: "So the Germans in the pensione won't think we didn't want to hear it. Isn't that right?"

"Yes, that's right."

I insisted: "At eleven-thirty? We still have plenty of time to take a stroll."

"No, we must stay here. The stroll might also be unfavorably remarked upon."

Paula went to the door and stepped out into the garden; Trude and I followed her. There was a group of wicker armchairs nearby, against the wall of the build-

ing. Paula sat down, saying in a low voice, filled with caution: "We'll stay here a minute, then go into the parlor."

We sat down. Paula turned to me: "Signor Lucio, you mustn't believe that I'm too strict a mother. The truth is that I'm too fond of my darling Trude," and with this, she reached over to the arm of Trude's chair and took her hand. "That's why I'm constantly full of worries that, actually, in this day and age, are never entirely unfounded."

There was a moment of silence. Trude stared stubbornly straight ahead; Paula suddenly raised Trude's hand to her bosom, over the heart, then cried in a pathetic tone: "Trude, can you feel this heart? It's beating only for you. If you're happy, it beats calmly; if you're unhappy, its beats are fast and anxious: if you suffer, it feels heavy; if you're joyful, it becomes lighter. Now, I'm afraid, I'm constantly afraid for you, I don't know why, perhaps because these are such difficult times and people are so wicked. That's why, if I say we must remain at the pensione this evening, you mustn't think I'm saying it out of excess discipline, a sense of duty. I'm doing it only because of what I feel for you and because, if anything were to happen to you, I would surely never survive you."

She pressed Trude's hand to her bosom; her eyes, usually opened wide in a haunted stare, now seemed veiled and softened by tears. Trude submitted for a little while, then slowly withdrew her hand and said in a dull voice: "Yes, all right, but there's no need to tell Signor Lucio all these things. Naturally, we'll stay at the pensione."

Paula snatched back Trude's hand, put it to her lips, and kissed it fervently. Then she turned to me, saying:

"You are no doubt amazed by these concerns of mine. But you can have no notion of what my daughter means to me."

I said nothing. On the one hand, I felt mystified by the nonchalant way she passed off homosexual love as maternal devotion; on the other, I couldn't help being struck by the intensity and sincerity of Paula's feeling. She pressed yet another kiss on Trude's hand, then stood up abruptly, saying: "Now we can go have our coffee."

So we went back into the pensione and headed for the parlor. To explain my repugnance at spending the evening there, I should say that it wasn't due so much to a preference for the moonlight on the sea which could be admired from the Cesare Augusto belvedere as to my hatred for the room itself. To put it briefly: for me, a man of the twentieth century, insecure and skeptical, entering that parlor was like entering a kind of temple which preserved the certitudes, elsewhere defunct, of the nineteenth century. And so, even as I followed the two women, I couldn't help casting a long anguished glance over that totally wintry room furnished fifty years ago for the evenings of bourgeois visitors from the North. There, then, were the four windows, fortified by the heavy draperies of dark damask; there was the group of massive easy chairs symmetrically arranged in each corner of the room; there, in the middle, was the round table, covered by a rug of an opaque design that fell in stiff folds, with the newspapers and magazines, German, English, Scandinavian, Swiss, arranged in neat piles around the decorative bronze vase. And there, finally, between the windows were the life-size daguerreotypes of bearded nineteenth-century figures: Ibsen, Victor Hugo, Tolstoy, Darwin, along with those of obscure Teutonic monarchs in dress uniforms. What else was

needed? The reason, moreover, why Signor Galamini, the last descendant of the original proprietors of the pensione, hadn't taken the trouble to dismantle this sort of museum of the last century's celebrities, this conservation of his could be explained only by the generally lazy and somnolent atmosphere of Anacapri.

To my disappointment, Paula and Trude went straight toward the corner with the radio set where about fifteen people had already gathered, virtually all the German guests of the pensione. I was duly introduced to them ("Signor Lucio translates from the German, he speaks our language excellently"), then I sank into a chair beside Trude's.

For some time I had known that these Germans, whose opinion meant so much to Paula, were mostly high-school teachers or university professors, and their wives. Only one of them proved to be unmarried. He was a man I had already noticed, if for no other reason because of his commanding presence; as a solitary guest, I had got into the habit of mentally nicknaming people I didn't know, and so I had saddled him, secretly, with the name of the Landsknecht. This so-called Landsknecht greatly resembled a figure in a Dürer drawing entitled *Portrait of a Young Man.* The portrait depicts a head typical of the Latinized German culture of the artist: a broad, high forehead; black, curly hair; big, dark eyes with a steady, dreaming gaze; a thin, straight, sharp nose, with flaring, haughty nostrils; a mouth at once contemptuous and sensual. Our Landsknecht resembled Dürer's young man as certain Tuscans today resemble figures in the paintings of our Renaissance: in an anachronistic and unconscious manner, as if through a surviving reflection of a distant cultural origin. I had given him the nickname of Landsknecht because it was not hard to imagine him

wearing the plumed cap and the chain-mail tunic of a soldier of fortune. But the resemblance stopped there. In reality, the Landsknecht was a professor of history in some provincial university, I forget which.

At that moment the Landsknecht was engaged in a heated argument; so he replied to my greeting with the barest nod. His opponent in the discussion was another professor, whom, also in the course of my solitary observation, I had dubbed Winter Apple, a Neapolitan variety of red apple that, over a period of time, becomes withered while retaining its bright color. And in fact the professor I dubbed with this nickname greatly resembled an old apple, preserved through the winter on a shelf. Tall and thin, but with a little spherical belly halfway along his body, with wispy blond-gray hair like millet, he had a face all wrinkled and scarlet, from which two faded blue eyes peered out. The face of Winter Apple was not only withered but also scarred like apples that have fallen from the tree onto a sharp rock. A healed wound from a Mensur, the traditional student duel, creased his face to the chin. The Landsknecht also bore the mark of military valor, but of quite a different kind: from his left shoulder, his sleeve hung empty.

The argument, in fact, was on the subject of the Mensur. As I quickly realized, the Landsknecht was opposed to student dueling; Winter Apple was favorable. The latter, a tortoise-shell-framed monocle stuck in his eye socket, was warmly extolling the Mensur's significance of bravery and chivalry; the Landsknecht, his great dark eyes hidden behind a pair of very professorial eyeglasses, merely shook his head with stubborn disapproval. Winter Apple finished his peroration in favor of the custom; then the Landsknecht replied briefly that his adversary's arguments might well be explanations, but that

didn't make them justifications; the custom was anachronistic and should be abolished. Winter Apple, running out of ammunition, suddenly cried: "And yet you were a soldier, you fought, you lost an arm in the war. You should understand certain things better than many other people." To which the Landsknecht, inflexible, answered: "Precisely because I was a soldier, I would like the Mensur to be abolished." "Then you deny the very values you fought for." "I don't deny them. I fought for my country; among the values of my country I wouldn't include the Mensur." "But your country is made up of certain things that distinguish it from others. For example, the special sense of honor of which the Mensur is a characteristic expression." "Allow me to disagree." "You mean to say that our country is not distinguished from others by a special sense of honor?" "No. I mean only that I don't believe the Mensur indispensable to the German sense of honor." "You know it better than I do. I don't want to insult you by believing you don't know it."

Beside himself by now, Winter Apple turned to me. "You are a foreigner, but apparently you know our country well; and so you surely know what I mean when I declare that a special sense of honor distinguishes the German people from all other peoples. These things cannot be explained in words, you have to have experienced them. At any rate, there, in the duel, the two opponents stand face to face, so:"—at this point the speaker rose from his chair and assumed a dueler's stance, his arm extended, brandishing an imaginary saber—"they know that, in reality, it is not a matter of ending up as victor or vanquished, but rather of facing the challenge of another man with honor, that is to say with bravery and chivalry. It is a question not so much of skill as of identi-

fication. The student must merge with his saber effortlessly, without confusion, with the maximum calm and precision." At this point, Winter Apple made a great thrust and the monocle popped from his eye socket. Then he sat down again, saying in agitation: "But I don't know whether a foreigner can understand such a thing, so exclusively German."

I assured him that I had some notion of it; after all, I had taken my degree at the university of Munich. Winter Apple nodded; then he began wiping his monocle with his handkerchief. Everyone was now looking at the Landsknecht, to see what he would answer. But the Landsknecht merely said: "Please excuse me," then got up, bowed a couple of times, and left.

After his departure I was sure that the professors and their wives wouldn't miss the opportunity to discuss the behavior of this opponent of the Mensur, and I wondered what comment Trude would make. Would she continue the play, would she pretend to be Beate, in other words, as she had at table a little while ago? Or, on the contrary, would she be herself, the Trude who had been converted to the cult of the Führer after her abortive attempt at suicide? I must say that I awaited her contribution anxiously; here it wasn't a question only of the "joke," but of something infinitely more important, which, if I may be allowed a play on words, was really a joke.

For a few moments nothing happened. The professors and their wives remarked on the behavior of the Landsknecht; Trude sat there quiet and motionless. What did the professors and their wives say? With a shift of the argument from general ideas to political debate, as predictable as it was depressing, they began to ask themselves who the Landsknecht really was. And, first of all,

where did he get those dark eyes, that black hair? Did Slavic or Latin blood flow in his veins by any chance? Or some other kind of blood? After having circled around the blood question for some while, as if they had realized it was a blind alley because it was a well-known, guaranteed fact that the Landsknecht was Aryan, the guests were back at the starting point; ignoring any racial implications, they were faced by the wholly individual singularity of the character. Why did the professor of history disapprove of the Mensur? What lay behind his disapproval? Some not quite orthodox political tendency? Or, indeed, actual membership in a left-wing party? And, furthermore, wasn't there something strange about the fact that, though he was married and the father of four children, he was here on Capri all alone, in the holiday season, when fathers and husbands consider it their duty to be with their family? And besides, why had he left the parlor and, with it, the radio on an evening like this, an exceptional occasion because of the announcement of a special message from the Führer? Where would he listen to the radio that evening? Or, rather, was it absolutely certain that he would listen to it?

At this point, while they were all discussing the Landsknecht question, and finding themselves in agreement on condemning him, but not in agreement about his reasons for behaving the way he had behaved, Winter Apple suddenly turned toward Trude, who was quiet and motionless, and asked her, with acid urbanity, why she was so silent, if it didn't seem to her that the Landsknecht was wrong and, in any case, that there weren't something strange in his behavior.

Everyone else turned toward Trude; I myself looked at her anxiously: now I was ardently desiring her to go on pretending to be Beate and to answer in character

with the imaginary twin. Then something strange, contradictory happened. Trude opened her mouth, and without altering the despairing expression proper to Beate, uttered these incredible words: "What are you so surprised about? Can't you see he's an intellectual?"

My first reaction was a feeling almost of profanation, Beate, the imaginary Beate, spiritual and intellectual, couldn't speak like this. It was as if a priest had suddenly started cursing. But then, a moment later, an overwhelming idea came into my mind. Yes, it was a profanation to make the character of Beate speak like that; but the responsibility lay with Nazi totalitarianism, which terrorized its citizens and forced them to say the opposite of what they thought. And so, basically, Trude's statement not only didn't contradict the character of Beate, but confirmed her authenticity, her normality. Beate, after all, was a German, like all other Germans, who, to survive in a terrorized country, didn't hesitate to lie to herself and to other people.

But this supposition almost immediately made me formulate another, no less overwhelming, which was its logical consequence: what if, in reality, the woman who had just spoken like a fanatical Nazi wasn't Trude playing the role of Beate but Beate playing the role of Trude? What if, in other words, Trude were a character invented out of the whole cloth by Beate to camouflage and defend herself better from totalitarian terrorism?

I wondered why I hadn't thought of this before. There was no doubt, in fact, that while Beate's spiritual despair had all the hues of truth, there was something excessive and caricature-like, something faked, therefore, in the sensuality, the greed, the vulgarity of Trude. What, for that matter, could be more authentic than despair in times of terrorist dictatorship, and what, in the same

times, less authentic than a healthy joy in living? But, especially, I was struck on the one hand by the restraint of the Beate character and, on the other, by the excess of the Trude. Wasn't excess perhaps the typical property of invention as opposed to reality, and restraint, on the contrary, the typical property of reality as opposed to invention?

Besides, what was the Hitler regime if not a regime founded, in one sense, on faith, and in another sense, on terror? And that faith was expressed through behavior that terror could easily simulate because it was simple, extreme behavior, similar, precisely, to that of terror. This explained the almost caricature-like exaggeration of the Trude figure, whose politics made her examine my penis to see if I was circumcised. This also explained the vulgarity, the exaggeration, the wildness, the gluttony, the brutality; all things too true not to be feigned. There was still, at this point, the question of the husband's and Paula's complicity in the "joke." After a moment's reflection, I decided that Müller and the woman friend knew very well that the Trude character was an invention dictated by terror; but they both accepted it because of the great love they felt for Beate. The reason why Trude had appeared at the moment when Paula had replaced the husband at Beate's side was explained by the rules of the "joke," which required that to make herself loved and to love me, Beate should be herself; whereas, on the contrary, to undeceive and repel me, she had to turn up in the guise of Trude.

The confirmation of these thoughts came to me unexpectedly from the professors and their wives. Beate's reply about the Landsknecht's confusing behavior, a reply totally in keeping with the character of the imaginary Trude, had opened a new discussion, no longer

about the Landsknecht, but about what an intellectual really was. Then it occurred to me that, like Beate, the professors also were terrorized and therefore pretended feelings and expressed opinions that they were far from feeling and having. The professors, too, were obviously intellectuals, if only because of their profession; but now, after Trude's reply, they seemed to vie with one another in repelling from their persons the infamous accusation. If I hadn't had other concerns, perhaps I would have been amused, however bitterly, seeing all those men, who had spent their lives among studies, try to make this forgotten, insisting that there were two cultures, one "healthy," "constructive," or "German," in short, and the other "decadent," "destructive," or, in other words, "Jewish." But I had other things on my mind, after Trude had behaved with such conformity, against intellectuals. I was thinking that in a regime of terror it's impossible not only to distinguish truth from falsehood, but also to distinguish the truth of falsehood, if I may be excused a play on words again, from the truth of truth. Who could say, for example, that the Landsknecht himself wasn't a provocateur who should be guarded against, by simulating the most orthodox conformity? At this point I must admit I wasn't the least bit sure all this was true; but the very fact that I thought it seemed to me typical of the ambiguous and disassociated condition that is characteristic of every society based on fear.

I thought these things as I observed the professors discoursing learnedly and subtly on who should be considered an intellectual in the negative sense and who in the positive sense; then I looked away from them and turned my eyes again to the two women. They were deep in private conversation; Beate had put her mouth to Paula's naked ear, and Paula was listening, with an at-

tention that was stiff and at the same time almost voluptuous, to what her friend was whispering to her. Then, seeing Beate's lips moving almost inside Paula's ear, I couldn't help suspecting, with vivid and absurd jealousy, that instead of speaking, Beate, without letting on, was moving the tip of her tongue in that alert ear, in a caress more and more intense and penetrating. Suddenly I thought that the whole question of Beate's double personality hadn't the slightest importance. What was important, on the contrary, was the love between the two women, a love completely requited, the very love that seemed impossible between me and the woman I stubbornly went on loving.

I don't know what happened to me at that moment. Suddenly I made a show of looking at my wristwatch, I stood up, and said in a very loud voice, in German: "I'm very sorry, my dear Frau Müller, but now I really am obliged to take you away. We just have time for our moonlight walk before the special message of the Führer."

It was the only pretext I could manage to find in my mood of frantic impatience that made me want to separate Beate from her friend as soon as possible and at any price. There was a pause in the conversation, just then, no doubt casual, but in my jealousy it seemed to me that the professors and their wives had become aware of the scandalous intimacy of the two women; and that I, instead of speaking to Beate, was addressing them, as if to demand their solidarity. My voice reechoed brutally in the silence; the professors looked at me with amazement; Beate drew away from Paula and said, in a calm voice: "I'm sorry, but I can't. I wouldn't want to be late for the Führer's speech."

I replied, in a shrill tone: "I foresaw that possibility. We can go and hear the speech on the radio in the café."

I saw Beate regard me with inscrutable attention, as if she had weighed the pro and con of her answer. Then she said in a low, reserved voice: "You're a foreigner, true, but you should nevertheless realize the unsuitability of going for a moonlight stroll when the Führer is about to announce something that might change our destiny and the destiny of mankind."

It was a flawless reply that could have been prompted equally by faith or by terror. But I saw only an obstinate refusal to come with me out of the pensione, away from Paula and the professors. Something snapped inside me; perhaps the string, taut for too long, of this ambiguity by now unbearable. I said: "I'm sorry. I'll take the walk by myself. Please excuse me." I bowed briefly, stepped from the circle of armchairs, and went into the hall.

XIII

Once I was in the hall, I realized I had no desire to take a walk. What had attracted me especially about the stroll was not the moonlight but the urgent desire to separate Beate from Paula and in particular from Nazism, represented at that moment by the Germans seated around the radio of the pensione. In taking Beate away, I would verify her identity: Beate, if not too terrified, would perhaps have even been able to spend the time of Hitler's message on a bench facing the spectacle of the full moon; but Trude, never. Now, which of the two had refused to leave the pensione? Beate, terrified, pretending to be Trude, or Trude, the fanatic, pretending to be Beate? Obviously, I was once more in the greatest uncertainty about the identity of the woman I loved.

In this mood, bewildered, listless, dejected, almost without giving it a thought, instead of stepping into the garden, I turned on my heels and began climbing the stairs. I didn't know what I would do; I knew only that I didn't want to leave the pensione.

On reaching my door, I opened it, then hesitated: should I lock myself in or should I leave the door slightly ajar in the event, not entirely impossible, that Beate (or Trude) were to come to me as she had promised? It's typical of my undecided state of mind that first I turned the key and then, repenting, turned it back in the opposite direction, leaving the door ajar. Then I went to the desk and sat down with my back to the door, facing a book which, the moment my eyes lighted on it, I recognized as the volume of Kleist's letters.

The book was open; I read: "Oh, the world is a strange institution! It's true that the two of us, Henriette and I, two sad and melancholy persons, have come to love each other with all our hearts and the greatest proof is that now we are dying together."

I read these lines and suddenly I heard, at my back, the door, which I had left ajar, now opening completely. Then the same hand that had opened it accompanied the door until it was closed. Then there was the sound of the key turning in the lock: the person who had entered didn't want to run the risk of being caught in my room. My heart began to beat faster, also because, now, the silence was prolonged; someone was moving behind my back, but so slowly and lightly that I began to doubt my ears. What did the mysterious visitor want? I didn't have time to formulate an answer because, all of a sudden, two hands were placed over my eyes and someone said in a low, intimate tone, not at all joking: "Now guess who I am, Trude or Beate?"

And so, I thought, after having deceived me and

mocked me for such a long time, Trude (or Beate: at this point I no longer knew what name to give her) took it for granted I had pardoned her and was resuming the "joke" as if nothing had happened. I was tempted to say to her face what I was thinking, and to send her from the room. Instead, I could only answer, with sorrowful sincerity: "I wish you were Beate. But I'm very much afraid you are Trude."

"Why are you afraid I'm Trude?"

"Because I love Beate, not Trude."

"In any case, this fear is a compliment for my art as an actress. It means I was really good."

"How?"

"It means that I played the part of Trude to perfection."

I was amazed. Now, with mysterious insight, she was confirming my supposition that the character of Trude was imaginary. The coincidence between my suspicion and her insight struck me as a proof of the love that united us: we loved each other, and for this reason we each had the same thoughts independently. I grasped her hands, took them from my face, and forced her to come around the desk. There she was before me, erect, staring at me with the eyes of Beate. I said to her: "The part of Trude? Then, finally, you must be Beate. Does Beate really exist? You won't believe it, but a little while ago, in the parlor, I thought the same thing."

"At what moment did you think it?"

"When you said the history professor was an intellectual."

"Why did you think it?"

"Because you can't be a caricature—Trude, in other words—you have perforce to be a real person, that is, Beate."

"In what sense is Trude a caricature?"

"In the sense that a woman like Trude, so healthy, so joyous, so Nazi, can only be an imaginary character. Beate, on the contrary, is the real thing, genuine, true."

She stared at me but said nothing. I went on: "Now tell me something: do you know Paula came today and told me that our whole relationship till now has been only a joke?"

"Of course, I know it. Paula and I agreed on it."

"You agreed? Why?"

"Because I didn't want you to come to Germany. I didn't want the thing to continue between us."

"But now you seem to have changed your mind."

"Yes, I've changed my mind."

"Why?"

"You could guess the reason by yourself. In any case, here it is: to make love tonight with you."

I took my head in my hands, as you do when you're afraid of losing your mind. "Now let's see. Let's tell the story of what has happened. I meet you on board the boat, you're with your husband, you look at me in a certain way. Then, for some days, you continue looking at me in that way. I learn your name is Beate Müller and that, taking Kleist and his mistress as models, you want to make love and then die with me. Just at the height of things, however, you leave. You go to Germany with your husband, announcing that in your place your twin sister will arrive, Trude. In fact, Trude does arrive, with a woman who introduces herself as your mother, and without beating about the bush, Trude lets me know that what she wants most in the world is to make love with me, casually, without despair, without suicide. But I love Beate; Trude doesn't attract me. Then Trude makes a strange proposal to me: exploiting their resem-

blance, she will pretend to be her sister, so I will have the illusion of making love with Beate, and at the same time I won't have to pay for that night of love with suicide. This is the situation when Paula comes to my room and reveals to me that it's all been a joke and Beate never existed. But before I have time to digest this revelation, you also come and tell me that Paula was lying, that Beate really does exist, that the imaginary character is Trude. Do you agree that this is how things have gone?"

"Yes."

"Now, tell me why you are supposed to have invented the character of Trude?"

She hesitated, then said: "I invented her because I didn't want to involve you too much. I wanted to reduce our relationship to the dimensions of a mysterious and inconclusive summer affair."

"You almost succeeded. But how do I know that this time it's real? How do I know you're not lying again?"

She shook her head. "How can you think a woman as vulgar and coarse as Trude could really exist? A woman who, at the moment she is kissing you, makes an obscene noise into your mouth, who forces you to show your member to see if you're circumcised, who eats two helpings of the same dish, just as, in the boat, she masturbates two times with your foot. How can you think that such a glutton, such a stupid fool, such a fanatic, such a sex fiend really exists?"

I pressed my hands to my temples. "But just now, at table, you looked at me like Beate, you refused food like Beate, you seemed in despair like Beate, whereas, in reality, after Paula's visit, I was supposed to think you were Trude pretending to be Beate."

"No, on the contrary. I was Beate, really Beate, and I wasn't pretending anything, and I hadn't pretended anything on the day when we met on board the boat."

"Now what do you want of me?"

She burst out laughing, though without joy, exactly like Beate. "I know what you're thinking. You wouldn't be Italian if you didn't think it. I've already told you and I confirm it: we'll make love, I promise you, this very night. I'll come to you, let's say after two o'clock, when I'm sure Paula's asleep."

"But why not now, at once?"

Suddenly I stood up, held my arms out toward her, and managed to graze her cheek with my fingertips. She drew back rapidly; she said: "Not now. I came up here only to tell you that nothing has changed between us. Above all, I didn't want you to think, after what happened downstairs in the parlor, that I was really a brutal and insensitive woman like Trude. But I must go now, Paula's waiting for me, she knows I'm here with you, she's quite capable of coming and getting me."

I said angrily: "She's jealous. After all, I believe she's the only person you love, the only one you make love with."

Ambiguously, she made no reply to this asseration, which in reality was a question. I insisted: "So it's true then. Paula is the only person you love."

This time she said: "In any event, she's the only person I'm sure would agree to die with me."

I cried, with absolute sincerity: "I'm ready to."

"Really?"

She looked at me now without sadness or unhappiness, with an expression I had never seen in her face before: conscious, pitiless demand. I hesitated a moment: that expression told me that before me, this time, stood truly

and definitively Beate, whose purpose, I knew, was to involve me in a death pact. After a very long moment, I thought: It's all bad literature; and precisely because it is bad literature, I, as the very bad man of letters that I am, cannot draw back. Farewell, life, farewell.

I raised my eyes and answered firmly: "Yes, really."

She opened her purse, rummaged in it, took out something, and said: "Very well, tonight we'll be lovers and then I will end it all here, in your room, with this."

She held out her hand, opened her fist, and showed me a little round silver box: "This is the cyanide I stole from Alois in Naples, but I don't want to force you, you can also choose; but without me this time, because I will already be dead. You will be free to do what I will have done or to scuttle off with your tail between your legs, happy at having got out of it so cheaply."

I couldn't help crying out: "But, Beate, how can you talk like this to me, when I love you so much?"

"If you really loved me, you would understand that I don't want to make love, I want to die, only to die."

I remained silent, chilled by the cold and vibrant fury of her voice. She added, almost immediately: "And now I really have to leave you. They're waiting for me down in the parlor."

"But you'll come tonight, as you promised me?"

She burst out laughing. "Are you afraid I'll have second thoughts at the last moment? Of course, I'll come, how could you doubt it?"

She hesitated, then added: "To speak like some operatic character: I have a tryst with two very important things: love and death. How can you think I would fail to appear?"

This time I thought I could no longer do or say anything. Her irony toward herself and a certain contempt

toward me prevented me. I got up from the desk, turned toward the door. Lightly, almost dancing in her green skirt that fell to her slender, elegant ankles, she crossed the room, blew me a kiss with her hand from the doorway, then vanished.

XIV

What to do? I calculated that Hitler's speech, announced for eleven-thirty, would last a long time: he was not a concise speaker; his so-called special message could go on as much as a couple of hours. Then, after the speech, there would no doubt be the comments of the German group. Finally, it was not impossible that there could be some further delay due to the peculiar situation we were in, Beate and I. What was I to do, then, in the three or four hours till Beate's visit?

It occurred to me that I could spend them with someone; nothing like an outsider's presence at times can distract us from an obsessive concern. But with whom? I suddenly remembered I had run into Sonia in the square that very morning and she told me Shapiro had arrived

from London. Why not go and call on him? She had spoken to him about me and he had evinced a great curiosity to meet me. I didn't think twice. I left the room, went down to the ground floor, and stepped into the telephone booth in the cornor of the hall. Almost immediately I heard Sonia's Russian–Caprese voice in the receiver.

I said: "This is Lucio. If there's no objection, I'd like to accept your invitation of this morning?"

"What invitation?"

"To call on Shapiro."

"But he's already in bed. And I'm putting him to sleep by reading him a novel of Trollope aloud. Do you know Trollope? One of his favorite authors, no doubt because he's so boring."

"Well, sorry then, I'll call you tomorrow."

After I said "tomorrow," I added, to myself, half seriously: If I'm alive.

But then Sonia's voice resumed, as if with sudden inspiration: "Wait. I'll just go and ask him if he can receive you like this, in bed. He does sometimes. Wait."

She left me there; I waited, my eye glued to the door of the parlor, beyond which, seated in a circle around the radio, the professors, Beate, and Paula were waiting for the moment of Hitler's special message. Sonia didn't keep me there long. She came back and said: "He says of course you may come. You'll find him in excellent humor. He's expecting you."

And so I left the pensione and a little later I was ringing at the little gate of Shapiro's villa. There was the buzz as the door opened; there was the steep stairway between the dry walls. The door of the house was open and alight at the end of the darkness of the terrace; in the yellow glow Sonia's black form was outlined. She im-

mediately shouted to me: "You know you're lucky? There's a steady stream of English tourists here who want to see him and, more often than not, he won't let them in. But the moment I told him you're an Italian intellectual, he promptly decided to give you a royal welcome. You know what he said? 'An Italian intellectual? I thought the species was now extinct. Let's have a look at this fossil.'"

Meanwhile, as she went on chattering, she led me along a narrow, marmoreal passage, past a row of heavy little studded doors. We turned; then Sonia knocked, listened for a moment, opened a door. She didn't enter, however. She looked inside and announced, in English: "Shapiro, this is Signor Lucio; I told you about him." A light, hesitant, but precise voice answered, also in English, saying to show me in. I stepped forward; Sonia immediately withdrew, closing the door after her.

As Sonia had warned me, Shapiro was in bed, sitting up, his back propped against two or three pillows. Through the yellow silk shade of the lamp on the bedside table, an unreal, somehow religious light, at once soft and clear, fell on his face, making me think of one of those colored wax statues found in churches. The white hair, combed back, seemed to glisten, hair by hair, neat and distinct and silvery; the slightly protruding forehead, the concave temples, the gaunt cheeks had the color of old ivory; the little eyes, of an intense blue, seemed made of some precious stone or enamel. Beneath the fairly broad nostrils of the faun-like nose, the mustache and beard, white and neat as his hair, surrounded but didn't conceal the big mouth, red and sensual, with an indefinably grave, pensive expression.

Shapiro was wearing a kind of white tunic, buttoned up one side in the Russian style; both arms were ex-

tended on the counterpane, I noticed the diaphanous whiteness of his little hands. On the bed I also saw a pair of gold-rimmed eyeglasses. Shapiro looked hard at me, he pointed to the armchair at the foot of the bed, saying in faulty Italian, whose imperfection, nevertheless, seemed underlined by some kind of self-satisfaction: "You are Signor Lucio? Here, make yourself comfortable. Or rather, make yourself uncomfortable, since the chair is in rather bad shape, or so Sonia tells me, when she sinks into it every evening to read some good Victorian novel aloud to me. This evening, you have taken the place of Trollope. Have you ever read any Trollope? I assure you he's worth it. In fact, I hesitated a while before receiving you; actually I'd have preferred Trollope, but Sonia sang your praises and so for one evening I've sacrificed Trollope for you. Let's hope you prove worthy of the sacrifice, he-he-he." When it was grave, that bearded face of his, precious as ancient ivory, had an expression of immobile and pensive wisdom; now, as he laughed, this expression suddenly shattered, changing into a malicious and sarcastic grin. A grin, it seemed, addressed to me, as if to establish, from the start, a kind of ironic and allusive communication between us. I answered, showing no sign that I had sensed his appeal to complicity: "Sonia told me you could receive me only in the evening; otherwise, I—"

"Of course, of course. I devote the other hours of the day to work; and if I'm not working, I go for a walk."

"Do you work in the Collection?"

"No, no, the Collection is completed, at this point. For it, Sonia is enough. No, I write, or rather I invent that falsity that goes by the name of autobiography or memoirs."

"Ah, you must have a lot to say; you've lived between

two worlds, between two centuries, one dying and the other rising."

I dished out these banalities, to stimulate him to speak of himself. I remembered that Sonia, at my question "Who is Shapiro?" had answered: "Ask him." But Shapiro merely remarked: "There are always two worlds, one dying and the other in its infancy. When I was your age I would have said the very same thing or rather I wouldn't have said it, because it would have seemed too banal to me. In any event, Sonia assures me that this evening I'm not losing anything: you should be more interesting than Trollope. Well then, my dear Signor Lucio, what is your—shall we say message?—your message for me?"

I thought, for the moment, that I had been caught off guard. But I immediately realized this wasn't so. Even before I had time to reflect on the wisdom of such a confidence, it occurred to me to say, with imprudent facility: "Rather than a message, I have a problem whose solution is difficult, very very difficult. If it interests you, I could expound it to you."

"Curious, an Italian with a problem besides that of mere survival. Well, let's hear what this problem is."

I answered, with sudden, uncontrollable emotion: "It's the problem of despair."

Over Shapiro's face, still imprinted with a sarcastic, almost facetious expression, passed a kind of cloud of concern. Obviously he hadn't expected such a personal reply and, especially, the impassioned tone with which I had uttered it. He said, all the same, with unpleasant, cold good will: "And what might the problem of despair be then?"

"If it's possible to live in despair and not wish for death."

With the promptness of someone anxious to resolve a tiresome matter with a witticism in order to get on to something else, he said: "While there's despair, there's life, wouldn't you say? Troubles begin with hope. Don't you know the proverb of your country: He who lives in hope dies in despair?"

I explained: "Perhaps I haven't made myself clear. My problem is the following: whether it is possible to stabilize despair, so to speak; that is, to live in despair as a normal condition of life, without going to the logical conclusion of suicide."

I had the impression I was being ingenuous to the point of impudence confronting the cynical, sardonic old man. But I wasn't sorry. On the contrary. God knows why, but at that moment, perhaps because I was thinking the problem of despair had now been resolved according to Beate's wish, I felt the need to talk about it, and it mattered little to me that Shapiro was the person least suited for such confidences. In fact, after listening to me with an increasingly bored and frowning air, Shapiro said, pretending an unctuous compassion: "My poor boy, when one is lucky enough to be twenty . . ."

"Please, I'm twenty-seven . . ."

". . . twenty-seven, my humble opinion is that one can only be in despair."

"Why is that?"

He was silent a moment, then said, suddenly becoming serious: "Because youth sees only the things surrounding it in the immediate present, and would like, on the contrary, to see those awaiting it in the most distant future. But in the future there's nothing, there can be only nothing; everything that concerns us is in the present. As the years pass, we think less and less of the future and more and more of the present. Or perhaps, of the past, as

I do. I belong, in fact, as you have rightly remarked, to a world that is disappearing. It's not surprising that I should greatly prefer the past to any future, is it? He-he-he!"

"And yet despair exists."

"It exists chiefly as a literary theme. Sonia tells me you're a German scholar. Then you probably know Goethe's Werther."

It seemed clear to me that Shapiro, frightened by the overconfidential tone of my so-called message, wanted to make a joke of it. I said brutally: "There's no need to be a German scholar to know Werther. In any case, Werther's answer is that it's impossible to live in despair and not wish for death."

He looked at me for a moment, his eyes, beautiful and hard, like ancient Oriental turquoise; then his face contracted in his familiar cackle: "I am not a German scholar, on the contrary. I am—how shall I say—a scholar of life, I mean someone who understands only life a bit. And I believe that true despair is not talkative but silent. If you were really in despair, you wouldn't come here to tell me so."

It was an oblique answer, virtually an invitation not to dwell on the subject. But a sudden emotion choked me. I said, in a low voice: "And yet, I am."

He gave me a look, at once penetrating and alarmed. The way you look, when at sea, at somebody who is obviously ill, and you're afraid he'll vomit on you. Then he said, clearly attempting to change the subject: "But weren't you supposed to listen to the radio tonight, to the speech of your Duce's friend? How is it you've come to hear the nonsense of an old sinner like me, instead of listening reverently to the word of the new Germany's high priest?"

I said curtly: "I wasn't interested in listening to him."

"You're not interested in the speech of the New Odin."

"I prefer to be here."

"Then you're not a Fascist as most of your fellow countrymen are?"

"No, I'm not a Fascist."

"Are you by chance an anti-Fascist?"

I hesitated, then explained: "If it's true, as I believe it's true, that Fascism is a mass regime, then I'm anti-Fascist."

"Well, well, what have you got against the masses?"

"Nothing, absolutely nothing. It's my own fault: the masses are normality; I'm abnormal. I'm made in such a way that it's difficult for me to live with the masses."

Now Shapiro seemed interested and relieved, perhaps because I had shifted from a personal fact to a general question. I added, after a moment: "So, if it's impossible to live together, the best thing is to separate."

"Now you're talking sensibly. Why despair when you can divorce?"

I would have liked to shout at him that I wasn't in despair because of the masses, that I would have been in despair anyway, with the masses or without them. But I restrained myself: Shapiro surely wasn't the man to whom certain things could be said. All the same, the indiscreet emotion that had choked me a little earlier now overwhelmed me a second time. I said in a low, strangled voice: "Divorce, in my case, means suicide," and at the same time my eyes filled with tears. Shapiro saw the tears and reacted with genuine terror: "Come, come, you seem to be a very sentimental young man, very very sentimental. Would you perhaps like me to call Sonia? She's a specialist in consoling the sorrowful."

I said, firmly: "You must forgive me. I'm unnerved because of certain personal problems of mine."

He answered, in a hard tone: "I forgive you, of course. This, however, doesn't mean that a person like you, unable to control his nerves, doesn't inevitably create embarrassment for other people."

I repeated once more, slightly raising my voice: "Forgive me, it won't happen again."

He looked at me for a moment, struck perhaps by the irritated tone, and as if wondering whether, by any chance, we were about to come to blows. Then he said gravely: "I hope so, too. In any case, you have finally achieved your purpose, which was to obtain my advice on the best way to live with the masses, or rather, as you say, to stabilize despair instead of jumping out of a window or taking poison or hanging yourself from the first tree you come upon."

I asked, almost spellbound, like a child whose mother has offered to tell him a fairytale: "And what might this advice be?"

He pretended to reflect, then said sharply: "Get rich."

I had expected a remark on the order of "Devote yourself to beauty." What I knew about Shapiro, art expert, creator of a famous collection, well-known figure in the international art world, justified that expectation. I was surprised by his sincerity which, precisely because it was courageous, ceased to be cynical. I repeated, dumfounded: "Rich?"

Shapiro nodded, seriously, soberly: "Yes, rich. When I was young I was poor, very poor, and naturally, like all the poor, I had ideals. My chief ideal was beauty. But I was a Russian citizen, because I was born in a village in Lithuania; and in that village, there was not much in the way of beauty. And so, at eighteen, with

this idea of beauty in my head, I left for England. In London I stayed with a relative who lived in an industrial suburb, not far from a big factory, a textile mill, I believe. I wasn't at home much; because of my ideal of beauty, I spent most of my time in museums. But I soon realized there was a flaw in my life as a lover of beauty. And this was my complete lack of what is rightly called means; in short, of so-called free time, indispensable for the enjoyment of that beauty I had chosen as the purpose of my existence. I had this realization one of those mornings, waking earlier than usual and hearing, in the distance, through the fog, the howl of the factory sirens from every part of the horizon. One would begin, another would join in a moment later, and yet another would finish. In that sound, gloomy and, yet somehow, reassuring (after all, it's better to work than to be unemployed), I could see the workers hurrying along the still dark streets of the slum. Caps pulled over their eyes, faces smudged with a growth of beard, rough jackets and trousers of scratchy, rumpled wool, each carrying his lunch pail or the box in which his wife had put his meal, the inevitable fish and chips or some other cheap food. Then, through an association of ideas, I realized that, my situation being what it was, I too, one of those days, would have to get up early, at a set time, if not to the sound of the factory sirens, certainly to the even more irritating one of the clerk's alarm clock. I was poor, and to the poor beauty is forbidden, by lack of time if by nothing else. At that moment I had a kind of immediate conversion, exactly like—no offense—that of St. Paul on the road to Damascus. Until then I had despised wealth; now, on the contrary, I was converted to the idea that first of all I had to become rich. No money, no beauty. And so, that very day, I went to an uncle who

dealt in furs and suggested I work for him. I won't bore you with my autobiography. Suffice it to say that within about fifteen years, I was rich, quite rich. In this way, to get back to your personal problem, I discovered, thanks to wealth, that one can quite easily live with the masses without having for that reason to contemplate suicide."

I said: "You advise me to get rich rather than kill myself?"

"I'd say yes."

I don't know for what reason, but I suddenly decided to lie. I said, in a polemical tone: "You speak on the assumption that I'm poor. I must tell you that's not the case. My father is a fairly well-known industrialist, and by no means on a small scale. We're rich, not to say very rich. So I can't aspire to becoming rich for the good reason that I am already."

Shapiro wasn't disconcerted. Like a very skilled tennis player, he immediately returned the ball. "Then I don't know what advice to give you. The poor can't understand the rich. I've remained poor, at heart, because I was born poor. So I can't understand someone who, like you, was born rich."

All of a sudden there was silence, and then, in the silence, like the din of a stormy sea, I heard coming through the wide-open window a thunder of applause. It was the applause, as I immediately realized, that hailed the conclusion of Hitler's speech. In the next room, someone, Sonia perhaps, had listened to it with the window closed and now, as if to rid the air of the echo of that raving eloquence, had reopened the shutters on the clear, pure space of the night. The din had a kind of mobile vastness like a tidal wave, as if it were spreading out slowly in a broad, closed hall; it seemed to be reborn every time it died away; now and then an isolated cry,

very shrill, as if of invocation, would be heard above the crowd. Then the door opened abruptly and Sonia came into the room. She said, breathless, her agitation tempered by her usual Caprese irony: "Hey, Lucio, in Germany something big must have happened. Not war, though. Some internal thing: a conspiracy against Mr. Mustache, discovered just in time, apparently. A whole lot of people shot."

I stood up, instinctively; I excused myself with Shapiro as best I could. Then I followed Sonia out of the room. A little later I was reentering the pensione.

XV

This last chapter of my memories of that distant time must be written backwards, beginning at the end, that is, with the discovery, at the locality called La Migliara, of the corpses of Paula and Beate. A peasant found them, seated on a bench facing the sea, in a very natural and affectionate attitude, a close embrace, cheek against cheek. Apparently the morning after Hitler's speech they had telephoned Germany and learned that among those shot during the so-called Night of the Long Knives there was Beate's husband, Alois. Then they went out, taking box lunches with them, saying they would eat by the sea. Instead, they wandered for a long time through the countryside by Anacapri; they didn't eat at all (the boxes were found, untouched, on the bench). Then

they went to La Migliara and there, facing the smiling Mediterranean, they swallowed the mortal pills.

The reader may want to know how I spent the night after my return to the pensione from Shapiro's villa. Strange to say, in my memory, usually so precise and so detailed, there is, as far as that night goes, a kind of blank, or rather an uncertainty. I remember only that I went straight up to my room because I had no wish to hear the Germans' comments on Hitler's special message. Probably I read, smoked, daydreamed: in short, one way or another, I waited for Beate. All of a sudden, I don't know how or why, I turned off the light. I believe I fell asleep almost at once.

I slept perhaps an hour, perhaps two; I don't remember. All at once I woke with the distinct sensation that someone was walking in the room. Naturally I thought immediately of Beate.

Strange to say, I didn't feel, at this thought, the exultant sensation usual in an amorous adventure reaching a happy conclusion. I thought only that the purpose of the visit, at this point, could no longer be love.

And so I merely pulled myself up and sat on the bed, peering into the deep darkness through which the mysterious presence was moving. Then I felt the touch of a light hand on my cheek. It was a strange caress, like a blind person seeking to recognize in the dark the features of my face.

Finally I felt the warmth of breath on my mouth and I heard the voice of Beate, who with pedantic precision, repeated softly, word by word, Nietzsche's verses about pleasure which wants eternity. I thought, then: How literary it all is!—but without irony, almost as if certifying with resignation a real fact; and I stretched out my arms toward the place, in the darkness, where Beate

presumably was. I wanted to embrace her, draw her to me. But my arms clasped the void. With a very bitter sense of frustration, I woke up.

It had all been a dream. Probably at that hour (it was three in the morning) Paula and Beate were still awake in their room, talking about Hitler's speech.

I turned on the light, looked at the room; there was nobody there. To make doubly sure, I went to the door and saw it was still ajar. I left it open; Beate might still come. Then I lay down again. At some undetermined moment, I fell asleep and didn't wake up until broad daylight.

Now I must still tell how Beate had arranged for me to receive in advance the news of her death and how only chance decreed that I should receive it late. About a month after the double suicide of Paula and Beate, in the country, where I had taken refuge at my family's house, I happened to leaf through the volume of Kleist's letters. Then I made a singular discovery: stuck in the book, I found a little sheet of paper on which there was copied the familiar letter with which Henriette Vogel announces her own death and Kleist's, but it had been changed in this way:

> My dearest Lucio,
>
> The loyal friendship you have always shown me till now awaits a strange test, for the two of us, Paula and I, find ourselves here, at La Migliara, in a very awkward state, for we are lying here, killed by cyanide, and must now look to the kindness of a sympathetic friend to commit our mortal husk to the safekeeping of this Italian earth, etc.

I couldn't say when Beate entered my room and slipped her imitation of Henriette Vogel's letter into my

volume of Kleist. Perhaps that same night, as I slept; perhaps in the morning, when I was in the dining room having breakfast.

Ambiguous to the end, she didn't want to survive the man who horrified her because his hands were stained with blood. And Paula, for her part, didn't want to survive Beate.